MARY CALMES



Chapter 1

Even though it was late for it, just after seven, I had stopped at the local market to pick up groceries on the way back to the ranch. I wanted to surprise Rand when he got home, with me being there and with dinner. Originally I had told him that I would have to stay late for a department meeting, but it had been cancelled, and instead of going for drinks with the others, I bailed. Even after two years, I still got excited at the thought of going home and being there when the man I loved walked through the door at the end of the day.

So since I had decided to cook, I had to stop and pick up supplies, and I was standing in the checkout line when Mrs. Rawley, who owned the store, came out of the back to see me. It was nice of her to make the effort.

In the small community of Winston, where her store was, the people were divided between those who didn't give a damn that I was gay and lived with my boyfriend, rancher Rand Holloway, owner of the Red Diamond, and those who were vocally and adamantly opposed to the idea. And while those who whispered when I walked by, muttered under their breath, or tossed off slurs when my back was turned were in the minority, there were still enough sprinkled around town to make me conscious of where I chose to conduct my business and spend my money.

After so long, I knew where I would and would not be accepted, but now and then, people still surprised me. What was nice was that more often than not, someone who I thought was just waiting to do or say something hateful or snarky was actually just looking for the opportunity to offer a warm handshake or a smile.

"Can I have Parker carry that out to the car for you, Stef?" Mrs. Rawley offered.

"I was gonna ask," Donna said, clearly exasperated. "For crap's sake, Mama, I wasn't raised in a barn."

I enjoyed the mother-daughter interaction, which was mostly exasperated and sarcastic. "I'm good," I told Mrs. Rawley. "Be nice to your kid."

"Thank you," Donna snapped.

"Respect your mother," I said, grabbing my bags.

"What he said," she shot back at her eighteen-year-old as I left with the jingle of bells at the front door.

As I started toward my car, my snazzy red and black MINI Cooper, I saw the police cruiser parked beside me and the SUV that had me blocked in.

"Really," I called over to the two deputies in the car. They could not miss the irritation in my tone.

Both men got out, both smiling at me, and I noticed that one of the deputies, Owen Walker, had a cup in his hand. He moved fast around the front of the cruiser, and as I reached him, I could smell the chai as he offered it to me.

"C'mon, Stef, you know this ain't our call."

I took the warm cup, and he took the bag of groceries and looked inside.

"What're you makin'?" he asked me.

"Just some breaded pork chops and a salad, Deputy."

He looked up at me. "That sounds good, and it's just Owen, all right?"

"Sure." I nodded, smiling at him.

"There's wine in here too."

"And wine," I chuckled. "Can't have good food without wine."

"I guess."

I smiled at him. "If it wasn't so late, I'd invite you and your family over."

"Maybe you'd like to have us another time," he said, his eyes suddenly on mine.

I wasn't sure if he was serious. He looked it, but I decided to test. "Maybe one Saturday we could barbecue if you want. The kids could see the horses."

"They would certainly love that, and my wife is dying to see how the house runs with the windmill system and the solar panels you all put in. She wants us to go green as well."

"Okay then, I'll give you a call."

"You do that." He nodded as he lifted his hand, motioning with his fingers.

"What?"

"Gimme the damn keys so I can put this in the trunk for you."

"I can put my own—"

"Just give 'em to me," he growled, grabbing them from my hand.

"This is harassment," I told him.

He flipped me off.

"Stop yelling at him," the second deputy, James, *call me Jimmy*, McKenna ordered me.

I turned to look at him, and he pushed his hat back on his head. "Is it true?"

"Is what true?" I yawned, so glad it was Friday, so ready to just sit and veg and do nothing for my long three-day October weekend. Monday was Columbus Day, so I had it off. Not that my cowboy would be observing a federal holiday, but at least he would probably take off early to spend the evening with me.

"Is Rand really going to build a school in Hillman?"

My eyes watered as I rubbed them a minute before I turned and focused on Deputy McKenna. "Who told you that?"

"All your hands know, Stef, and most of 'em got wives and kids. How long did you think it would be 'til the whole town knew?"

I exhaled before I took a sip of the chai latte.

"Why does that smell weird?" Deputy Walker suddenly asked me, turning my attention back to him as he passed me my keys.

"It's chai," I told him. "You ordered it. How could you order it if you didn't know what it was?"

"I didn't order it. I went in and said gimme what Stefan drinks, and the girl, whatshername with the messy hair—"

"They're dreadlocks, Deputy."

"Owen."

"They're dreadlocks, Owen."

"Whatever. She gives me this smile like I made her day and gets to work, and five dollars and twenty cents later, I'm carrying around something that smells like cinnamon and cloves and somethin' else."

"How did you guys know I was stopping in town instead of going right home?"

"Lyle's out on the highway, camped behind the 'Welcome to Winston' sign, and he saw you drive on by and make the turn toward town."

I nodded. "How is Lyle?"

"He's good. He and Cindy are expecting again."

My eyebrows rose. "Really?"

He grunted. "Don't I know it? That's number five he and my kid sister are havin'. I told him they should take up bowlin' to give them somethin' else to do together."

I couldn't stifle the snickering.

"I thought my mama was gonna explode."

"I bet."

"I think the sheriff was hopin' to have a word with you," Jimmy chimed in. "It's why we're here interceptin' you."

"That's right," Owen agreed. "And back to the coffee," he began, and Jimmy rolled his eyes. "I really don't get why everyone loves that new place so much. My wife wants to live there, and my daughter stops in every afternoon now after school, and there's gettin' to be a line."

The new coffee/bakery/sandwich shop that had gone up four months ago between the bed and breakfast and the senior center had been, for me, a blessing. I made sure to stop in every morning on my way out of town to grab my chai latte and a homemade blueberry scone. They saw me coming and made my drink, the four people who worked there all knowing my face and name on sight. It was nice.

"They knew what you wanted when I said your name," Owen told me.

"Not a lot of chai drinkers in this town," I assured him.

"I expect not."

I tipped my head at the SUV blocking me in. "Where is the big man?"

"The sheriff is picking up his campaign posters from Sue Lynn's."

"Why?" I asked them. "No one is running against him. Why does he need campaign posters?"

"I suspect he likes to see his face really big," he said, gesturing, showing me how mammoth the sheriff's head would be on the banners. "I mean shit, that's your tax dollars at work there, Stef."

I laughed at them and saw how at ease both of them were in my presence. "Listen, Deputy McKenna—"

"Jimmy," he corrected me like he always did.

"Jimmy," I sighed. "Why do you guys care if Rand is building a school? How does that affect you in any way?"

"I just think it's funny that he's building in Hillman instead of in his own town, is all."

I leveled my gaze on him. "He was kicked off every committee in this town as well as having his property lines rezoned so that the Red Diamond is no longer even in Winston but in Hillman instead."

"Yeah, I—"

"So your question makes no sense, as Rand is actually building in the town that the Red Diamond resides in."

His eyes narrowed. "Rand's been making a lot of donations and changes to Hillman lately. Do you know anything about that?"

"You know I do," I said, taking another sip of my latte.

He cleared his throat. "I heard the new school was gonna be a charter, but I ain't sure what that is."

"It means that they can pick and choose the curriculum and—"

"The what?"

"Curriculum is what you get taught, idiot," Owen snapped at him. "Go on, Stef."

I couldn't control my smile. "Rand wants things that the elementary school in Winston doesn't offer. He wants them to learn agriculture, which makes sense, and he feels that Spanish should be taught to the English-speaking kids and English taught to the Spanish-speaking kids. He wants them all to be bilingual."

"What for?" Jimmy asked.

"Because it will help them culturally and economically, and learning a second language improves your mind."

"Does it?"

"Yes," I assured him. "And little kids soak up language. It's easier to teach a little kid a new language than it is an adult."

"And so Rand's gonna build a school in Hillman just for that?"

"Right now all the kids on the ranch go to Winston Elementary, but there's no bus that comes all the way out to the Red Diamond, so they're all carpooling. But if Rand builds the school at the south end of Hillman and buys a couple of buses, then all the kids on the ranch as well as the ones who live on the north side of Winston can all go to school in Hillman. The bus can pick them all up every morning."

"When he builds the school, I want my kids to go there," Owen told us.

"You do?" Jimmy asked him, clearly surprised.

"Sure." He shrugged. "I think learning a second language is a great idea."

"There you go," I said, turning back to Jimmy. "It just makes sense."

"Rand sure has made a lot of changes since you got here, Stef," he told me.

"I think the sheriff wants to talk to Rand about that and about maybe taking his seat back on the community board of directors," Owen said softly.

But Rand had been voted off. When he had outed himself by moving me onto the ranch with him two years ago, the Winston community leaders had booted him from the seat that his father had held before him. They didn't even take the time to make it look good; instead they let it be known that the reason for revoking his seat was because of me, because Rand was gay. The Red Diamond Ranch was the largest in Winston as well as in the outlying areas of Croton and Payson, but that had not stopped the mayor and the rest of the city fathers from finding a loophole to get rid of my then boyfriend and now partner. They were homophobic assholes, every last one of them, and when they had rezoned the county three months later, officially relocating the Red Diamond to Hillman, that had been the last straw. I had been surprised that Rand didn't fight it, but when he explained, I understood.

The day the rezoning had gone into effect, the mayor of Hillman, Marley Davis, along with her entire staff, had made a special trip out to the ranch to welcome Rand and the Red Diamond to her county. She had been the one to give her permission to have the county lines redrawn and was thrilled to have Rand join her community and just knew that he would be too. She was hoping that Rand would come to the next city council meeting, as they would be interested in hearing any thoughts he might have. He was also more than welcome to bring me.

I was stunned, and Rand's smile had been huge as he recounted the events that Friday when I got home.

"Everything happens for a reason, Stef," he told me, drawing me into his arms. "I never thought too much of Hillman before, but suddenly I can't think of them enough. I feel like we got us a home all of a sudden, and I think I wanna help those folks out. I got some money that I think will do us all some good if you help me. I mean you got the background in acquisitions and finance and all. Will you take a look at some things and see what you can do?"

Of course I could, and would, and did.

And while it had been hard for Rand, severing all ties with the town he had grown up in, his warm welcome in Hillman twenty miles to the east had been overwhelming. Hillman had not been able to boast of having a large, thriving, eight-hundred-acre ranch in their county, but now they could. I had thought at first that it was the money he represented that they were responding to, but it was also the man himself.

Hillman had become Rand's new hometown and was, as a result, reaping the benefit of both his philanthropy and his loyalty. He made a

generous donation to the senior center, built a huge gas station/mini-mart with his friend AJ Myers that had already increased traffic in town, and donated five tricked-out computers complete with scanners and printers to the county library. He built a feed store, and put a new roof on the gymnasium of the high school when he found out it leaked during the last thunderstorm. In the next year, there were more city improvements in the works, and the proposed elementary school was at the top of the list. When Rand had been invited to attend school board meetings, he had been very touched. He was an important citizen in Hillman, his voice appreciated, his opinion courted, and his patronage counted on.

"Stefan!"

Wrenched from my thoughts, I found myself standing in front of Sheriff Glenn Colter. "Oh, Sheriff, what can I do for you?"

"You bought the Silver Spring from Adam Weber last week."

I had to catch up with the conversation that we were apparently having.

"Didn't you?"

"I didn't," I told him, taking another sip of my latte. "Rand did."

"Adam said that you negotiated the deal."

"That's what I used to do, Sheriff," I said, watching the lines in his face tighten. "And even though I teach school now, at Westland Community College, apparently it's a skill I still possess. The whole background in acquisitions thing doesn't just go away."

"Well, Adam said that you were real fair with him so that's why he sold, but that he didn't mean to include the parcel of land down by the Dalton place."

"That's not what he told me."

"Well, he wants it back."

"Really?" I asked drolly. "You talked to him in Vegas, did you?"

"What I mean is," he said, then cleared his throat, "that's what he was fixin' to tell you before he left."

"Uh-huh."

"Stefan."

"You're talking about the parcel that butts up against the Coleman piece, right?"

He grunted loudly. "We both know that those folks from Trinity want that piece, because the way it's zoned now if Rand sells them the Silver Spring and clear down to the highway, then they can make their own drive and not run through Winston at all."

"Yes, I know," I told him. "And with the gas station in Hillman and a resort between the Red Diamond and Hillman... why would anyone even go through Winston?"

"Rand bought up the land, and now he's fixin' to turn us into a ghost town."

I shook my head. "The people from Trinity—"

"That son of a bitch, Mitch Powell, wants to build a resort and a golf course and God knows what else out here, but only if he gets the land to the east where—"

"Rand sold it to him," I said, because it was no longer a secret and would actually create a whole slew of jobs for all the neighboring towns. Mitchell Powell, golf pro turned entrepreneur turned multi-millionaire, was going to build *the* resort in the area. He was about to put Hillman on the map, thanks to Rand, who had basically collected a monopoly that no one had wanted or given a damn about, and sold it for buckets of money that he was poised to do great things with.

The Silver Spring, Twin Forks, and Bowman ranches, none of which had been working ranches in years, would all be converted into a huge, sprawling, hundred-acre monolith of wealth and prosperity. It would be a very posh, very exclusive, very expensive resort, catering to the rich and famous, that would be far enough from the ranch as to not adversely affect it or change the lives of the people who lived there. The Red Diamond would remain the same, and the land that Rand had bought would finally be put to good use. And even though the town of Winston itself would not see the boon directly, as there were no civic projects planned, the people who lived there would benefit directly from the hundreds of new jobs that were about to be created.

If you didn't work on a ranch, there was nothing to do in Winston. You had to drive to Lubbock, just like I had to, to work. But now, thanks to

Rand Holloway buying and selling and Mitchell Powell building, there was about to be a great influx of employment.

"Rand sold all three ranches to Powell?"

"Yessir, he did," I said, walking around him to the driver's side door. "Now move the cruiser. I wanna go home."

The muscles in his jaw tightened as he followed me. "How could he do that to the town he grew up in?"

"He just created thousands of jobs for the people of the town he grew up in," I told him. "Buildings will go up, and when that's done, there will be jobs at the resort to fill. This community just got saved."

"But where the resort would be.... Hillman will be the town the resort is located in, not Winston."

"Why does that matter? The people you serve will be better off for the influx of jobs."

"And Hillman becomes the point of interest between Midland and Lubbock while Winston is left as it is."

"What would you have Rand do about that, Sheriff?"

"You're a smart boy. You understand what I'm saying to you."

I squinted at him. "Papers have been signed, Sheriff. Mitchell Powell has come and gone with deeds and rights and more lawyers than Rand said he ever saw in his life. The people who sold their property to Rand did so under no duress. We both know that the Silver Spring and the Twin Forks have been dead for years, and the Bowman place... well, all Carrie wanted to do was sell and move to Oregon to be close to her son. Running a successful ranch in this day and age is hard work, and for some it's easier to simply get paid and get out. Rand found use for land that was going to waste, and because of that, his own ranch can be that much bigger and that much more lucrative and even more capable of supporting the men and their families, who live and work on it. Now I understand that you're concerned about Winston, but Rand had to do what was best for the Red Diamond, and in the process, he ended up doing right by the town."

"The mayor doesn't see it that way."

"I suspect Rand won't give a damn."

He scowled at me. "I suspect you'd be right."

I smiled back.

He visibly deflated.

"It's not your fault, you know. I know that you weren't one of those who wanted Rand off the board."

His eyes searched mine.

"I know your only reservations with Rand stem from the fact that sometimes he can be kind of an ass."

"Sometimes?"

I chuckled, smiling bigger, unable to stop myself. "It's late, Sheriff. Are you not eating at home tonight?"

"No. Mrs. Colter is visiting her sister in Abilene."

"Well, would you like to come by the house and have some dinner? I have more than enough for three."

"No thank you, Stefan, but I do appreciate the invite. I've got to go over to the Drake place and talk to them about Jeff."

It took me a minute because nothing at all ever happened in Winston. It was why Rand and I had been such big news. "Oh, the drag racing," I chuckled.

"It ain't funny. They could get themselves killed doin' that."

"On the tractors," I said, trying really hard not to sound patronizing. "Yes, I'm sure they could."

He thrust his hand at me to shake. "Call me when you're makin' the lasagna again."

"Yessir, Sheriff, I sure will," I promised, taking the offered hand in mine.

He gave me a smile before I turned to get in my car.

"Stef."

I looked back at him over my shoulder, opening the door.

"Call me if you're makin' the pot roast too."

"Oh, okay," I teased him. "I didn't realize you had favorites."

"Damn right," he told me before he suddenly froze. "You ain't makin' any of those tonight, are ya?"

"No, sir, I'm not."

He grunted before he got in the mammoth car.

It was actually really nice that the man had favorites. Before I began my life with Rand, my culinary skills were basic at best. But the restaurants in Winston were both barbeque places, and while they were good, sometimes variety was nice, so one of us had to learn to cook, and of the two of us I had more time. He really enjoyed it when I slaved away in the kitchen for him; why, I had no idea, but the look on his face when he came in the house and found me in the kitchen was enough to melt me through the floor. He really enjoyed the hell out of me being domestic.

I watched as the sheriff moved his SUV, honking as he drove away. The deputies both followed suit, and when I was headed for home, I had time to think about the transformation my life had gone through in just a short amount of time.

Two years ago, Rand Holloway and I had gone from enemies to lovers in sizzling style over the course of his sister Charlotte Holloway's four-day wedding blowout. The bride, my best friend in the world, had asked, ordered, commanded me to be her man of honor, and because she needed her brother there as well... Rand and I were forced to share space. It was a recipe for disaster, as he and I could barely manage to be civil for any extended period of time.

Rand and I had never been anything but a horror to each other, but that weekend the reasoning for ten years of guerilla warfare had become clear. Rand liked me, had always liked me, and in fact it was actually way more than that. He was sort of crazy about me. But putting an out and proud gay man together with a cattle rancher from Texas had been a tough idea for him to come to grips with. Once he had, though, once he had figured out the truth about himself, what he needed and what he wanted, he had been ready to let me know.

The path to true love had not been an easy one. While Rand and I were navigating the change from enemies to friends to lovers, my ex-boss, Knox Bishop, had been trying to kill me and frame me for fraud and embezzlement. It had been a very interesting week of my life and one that had, in the end, prompted my move across the country to live on a cattle

ranch. And though I loved the man desperately, the transition was anything but easy.

Rand was a cowboy, and I was a city boy used to having access to all the things a metropolis had to offer twenty-four hours a day. Not that I didn't love the ranch or the man who owned it, but there had to be a happy medium, and I ended up making all the changes while Rand's life stayed pretty much the same. And while I understood that there was no other way for that to work—his ranch was the unchangeable, unmovable piece in the equation—even though logically I did get it, I ended up angry nonetheless.

I took my frustration out on Rand until I realized that the person I was really mad at was me. I was trying to live my old life and my new one all at the same time, and it wasn't working for anyone.

What was nice was that I even had the opportunity to try out what didn't end up working in the first place. I had been able to make the transition from Chicago to Lubbock because I was hired by Abraham Cantwell, my best friend's new father-in-law, to restructure his financial office. Unfortunately, with the changing economy, my new job was shortlived. Mr. Cantwell had to let all but two of his staff go and eventually closed his business, retiring later that year. In looking for new gainful employment, I had been faced with the decision to either look for a job in an even larger city than Lubbock or stay there and take a position at a much lower salary than what I was used to. I could either commute, and keep an apartment in Dallas or Houston and visit on the weekends, or I could stay in Lubbock and go home every night to Rand. It was time to make a decision about my future, and since I had dived into the deep end two years earlier, I chose my cowboy and life on the ranch, even though the idea of losing myself there terrified me. When I fell back on my minor and took a position at the community college teaching Intro to World History, Rand had been beside himself.

"I have no idea why you're so happy," I had told him as I set up my small—tiny—cubicle of an office in late August in preparation for the fall semester.

"You chose us, Stef," he had said simply, his smile out of control as he looked around the broom closet that was posing as my new work space. "I don't think you know what you really did here."

But I did. I had trusted him and believed in him, put faith in the life we shared, and had chosen to lean on him instead of standing alone. I had been halfway in and halfway out for two years and had finally, completely, committed.

"Stef."

I looked over my shoulder at him and realized how big he seemed in the tiny office.

"You know I just signed that three-year agreement with Grillmaster to be the beef supplier for their entire restaurant chain."

He had spoken so casually, but I knew it was a big deal. I had helped him get ready and coached him on the contract. His lawyer had appreciated my help, and now, apparently, it was all signed, sealed, and delivered. I was thrilled for him and his ranch and so rushed across the five feet and launched myself into his arms.

I was surprised when he caught me and put me down on my new desk, wedged himself between my legs, his hands on my face, in my hair, as he looked down at me from his towering height.

"This is the biggest thing that's ever happened to the ranch, Stef."

It was a huge account, and one that I knew Rand and his lawyers—there were four now—had been working on for a while. "Why didn't you tell me before?" I asked excitedly. "We have to go out and celebrate and—"

"You know why I wanted that deal so bad?" He cut me off, stilling me.

"Yeah, so you could be that much closer to financial—"

"It was for you, Stef," he told me, pushing my hair back from my face, tracing my eyebrows with his thumbs, my cheekbones, to my chin. "That account is yours to take care of and grow and work. It was your idea to begin with. I wasn't even gonna bid on that contract, but you convinced me to try. Without you being my champion, I would have never thought that I could do something like that."

I smiled up at him, sliding forward on the desk, my hands on his hips, inhaling him, the smell of the summer sun on his clothes and sweat and the musky scent that was just Rand. "I'm happy to be the voice of reason in your head." I teased him.

His thumb stroked over my bottom lip, and as he looked at me, his eyes narrowed to slits of electric blue. My stomach flipped over.

Slowly, he bent toward me, and when I felt his fingers on my jaw, I tilted my head back as he wanted and received the claiming kiss. His mouth slanted down over mine possessively, his tongue parting my lips, rubbing over mine. I moaned deeply, and his hands were on my thighs, lifting, wanting my legs wrapped around his hips.

"Why are you wearing that shirt?" he asked me, the words spoken against my throat, his hot, wet breath on my skin.

"What?" It was a strange question.

"Why are you wearing *my* shirt?" he asked pointedly.

From the low, husky sound of his voice, I understood that my wearing his clothes had touched something very primal inside of him. He liked it a lot. "Because it was clean, and we need to do laundry," I said, shoving my groin against his abdomen, pressing into him.

"It's so fuckin' hot."

There was nothing remotely sexy about me dressed in an old practice T-shirt of Rand's that had his number on it, seven, from back when he played football in high school. I had noticed that there was a rip in it only when we were halfway to the college, but had no intention of driving all the way home just to change. It wasn't a huge hole, more a tear that you would only notice if you stared. And he had promised me a walk to the creek after we visited my new office and had lunch, having taken off the whole day like he never could or did, just to spend some time with me. So because my day would be filled with just us, I had seen no real reason to change. And now I was glad I hadn't.

"You know, between that there shirt and your hat, I bet none of these folks 'round here expect you to be faculty."

"No, probably not," I gasped because his hands had closed on my ass and squeezed tight.

"Fuck," he growled, and moved fast, taking off his hat, doing the Frisbee throw with it to the chair, and bending to shove the T-shirt up so he could kiss my bare stomach.

"Rand—"

"Sometimes I just wanna lick over every piece of you."

Oh God.

He pressed his lips to my abdomen and kissed and licked and suckled and nibbled until I was writhing under him on the edge of the desk. My belt was hastily unbuckled, the snap tugged on and the zipper roughly pulled. I felt his hands spreading the flaps, sliding over the elastic waistband of my briefs and then his fingers grazing the skin above my shaft.

I lifted up and he peeled everything down, jeans, underwear, and my cock bobbed free, hard and already leaking with just the promise of attention. I shivered when, without a word of warning, he bent and took me down the back of his throat.

"Rand," I called his name, hands in his hair, loving the feel of his hot mouth and the fierce, exquisite suction, the cold hard wood on my ass, the taboo of being in an office, and the knowledge that we were the only ones in the entire six-story building. School was out until the first week in September, and I was so very, very glad.

The man who had been a novice at blowjobs two years earlier was now well-practiced, with a sense of his own power and an acute knowledge of all my hot buttons. He knew it had to start fast and end slow, knew that I liked it best when he dripped saliva down my crease and pressed fingers inside me at the same time, and knew, finally, that I would come loud and hard if I was manhandled and held down and fucked until I screamed.

"Let's try somethin' different," he growled, and I was bent in half, my knees, still trapped in my jeans, shoved against my chest, his hands on the back of my thighs as I felt his tongue slide over my entrance.

"Rand!"

He pressed his tongue inside me, and I had to grip the edge of the desk not to jolt under him. It felt so good, the stubble of his beard on my tender skin, the slow, sensual stroking, and his mouth against my fluttering hole. When he added a finger, my back bowed up off the desk.

I heard him spit, felt the second finger slide in with the first, coated in saliva, and scissor inside me.

"Oh Rand, please."

He fucked me with his fingers, as his other hand slid over the clenching muscles of my abdomen. "You are so beautiful, Stef," he got out,

his voice gruff and low, as he reached for my jeans, yanking them off my left leg, not bothering with the right, just needing to be able to part my thighs, and spread me before him.

"You get off on looking at me like this, holding whatever position you put me in."

"Yeah," he almost snarled.

"You want to fuck me anywhere you want, mark me, and put me on my knees wherever you please."

There was only a growl from him.

"So fuck me," I begged him, pushing back on his thrusting fingers, wanting to be fuller, needing deeper, needing more.

"You're so tight."

"Fuck me!"

Slowly, he withdrew his slippery, talented digits, and then grabbed hold of my ass, my cheeks, spreading them as I felt the engorged, leaking head of his cock press against my puckered hole.

I lifted up, ready for him. "I need you."

"And if we had lube, I would bury myself in you so hard you'd fuckin' scream my name, but we're gonna go slow until I feel your body wrap around me all tight and wet."

The man had his own, aching, demanding need, but for him, always, I came first. He pressed forward into me, pushing gently but insistently, letting my inner muscles relax and remember the pleasure the intrusion would bring. They rippled with anticipation.

"Oh fuck, Stef, you feel so fuckin' good."

He eased back a fraction and then pushed forward, my channel clenching around the thick, hard silky length of him, precome and saliva mixing together, the slide not as smooth as usual, but the slight burn felt amazing, the pinch sending sizzling heat racing over my skin.

I lifted higher, forcing him to thrust inside to keep me still, and when I lifted a leg, resting my calf on his shoulder, he tugged me forward, and buried himself inside me, sheathing his enormous cock deep inside my ass.

"Rand!" I screamed his name.

His balls were against my ass as he began pumping into me, the smack of skin on skin like a hammer in the tiny room.

He felt too good. I was so full, stretched like I always was, as his shaft slid over my prostate, and he wrapped his fingers around my painfully hard, leaking cock.

I whimpered and moaned, lifting my other leg to his shoulder as he bent over me, driving inside, pistoning in and out of me, the desk shaking with the force of each driving thrust.

"Fuck, Stef, I gotta see!"

He moved me so easily, pulling me close, the angle changing so I was impaled for a moment, the sensation of him so deep that I caught my breath for a second before I was shoved face down on the desk.

"Oh fuck yeah," he groaned. "Look at your ass take my cock."

Rand loved to watch his massive dick slide in and out of my small, round, tight ass. Even more, he liked to fist his hand in my hair, yank my head back, and hold there as he pounded into me. His kink was to see the slope of my back, watch my pink hole as it swallowed the veined shaft of his inch by inch. I felt him tremble with lust.

"Fuck me so I feel it, Rand," I told him. "Fuck me hard."

The first plunge took my breath away.

"Jerk yourself off, baby." His voice cracked, lowered. "I can't do it. I gotta hold on."

I understood.

His part was to clench my hip so hard he'd leave bruises, tighten his grip in my hair so I was immobile, and give himself over to the orgasm roaring through him as he drove into me with brutal, savage intensity.

I didn't have to touch myself. When he nailed my prostate on the second thrust, I came on my desk, shooting my load over the cheap polished wood.

"Stefan!"

My name was howled as my channel was filled, thick and hot, and he fucked me through his orgasm and mine, pumping hard as my muscles clamped down, squeezing him, milking him dry, ringing every last bit of pleasure from our savage coupling in my new office.

"Great way to christen my desk, Rand." I laughed as he finally took a breath, wrapping his arms around me, straightening me up without pulling out, his chest plastered to my back.

He bit down into my shoulder, and I shuddered in his arms, reveling in the feel of him even through his clothes and of his now-softening cock still inside me.

"I feel so good when I'm inside you, Stef, and not just because it's fuckin' heaven, but because I can feel your heart. You are all mine when I'm inside you, and I know it, and I just wanna brand you or something."

I grunted. "Do not get any ideas."

He laughed, and I felt his mouth open against the side of my neck. The man did like leaving his mark on me. I was lucky that school didn't start for three more weeks; a hickey on the first day would not make a good impression.

"Thank you for staying," he said after another minute, turning me suddenly, spinning me around and giving me a full body hug, all of him pressed to all of me.

When we got back to the ranch after lunch, he walked me a different way to the creek than he normally did, along some railroad tracks. He made me wear my cowboy boots like he always did when we walked through grass or over dirt. It turned out that boots were not just decorative; they saved you from things like rocks and snake bites and a myriad of hidden dangers. The walk took longer than I thought it would, and after a while, because it was hot, I decided to go barefoot.

Rand was concerned.

"You're gonna get splinters."

What was funny was that of all the things in the world—spiders, snakes, acts of God—he was worried about splinters. It was stupid until I got one.

"Shit."

"Told you."

He bent and then flipped out the knife he carried all the time, and went down to one knee.

I moved back. "It's a splinter. You don't need to cut off my foot or something."

"Don't be a damn baby. I know what I'm doing."

I was amazed that the tip of the knife could be wielded so deftly. When he turned his back to me, offering, I climbed on. I had not had a piggyback ride since I was five, and it was kind of fun. I really enjoyed pressing my groin to the small of Rand's back.

"Stop," he ordered me. "Or you're gonna get put on your hands and knees right here, and once a day without lube is probably more than enough."

I was a little sore, but not enough to say no to Rand being back inside me. "Rand—"

"Wait," he interrupted me. "Just... I need to say something."

"What's that?"

"About earlier, I want you to know that between the deal with Powell and now this contract with Grillmaster, my ranch, our ranch, is good. I mean if I get caught in a stampede tomorrow, you and my mother and Char are all well provided for and—"

"For fuck's sake, Rand," I barked at him, pinching one of his nipples before I pushed off his back, dropping to the ground. "Why would you even say something like—"

"So you'll believe me when I say that all you were doin' when you were workin' that job was annoying the shit outta me." He growled as he turned around to face me. "I need you here, Stef. I need you to take care of my home and me and my life so I don't just become this goddamn ranch!"

"But you already are the ranch," I reminded him.

"No, Stefan," he said as he grabbed hold of the back of my neck and yanked me forward, forcing me to look him in the eye. "You are my life. Nothing else means anything if you're not here."

The way he was looking at me was almost scary. I had no right to be the man's everything when I was still so messed up, worrying about being able to support myself and save while working at a much diminished salary. I needed to have a safety net, but Rand was telling me it was unnecessary. "I don't think you have any idea what you're saying."

"I'm speaking clear as anything. You're just bein' ornery."

"Ornery?" I laughed at him. "Who uses that word?"

"Listen to me," he began, ignoring my amusement. "We have us a joint checking account that you never touch. We have a savings account that you don't touch either. I'm telling you right here and now that I want you to close your account from Chicago and start using the one we share. If you end up not liking the teaching, you can open your own business, do whatever the hell you want, but I need to see your face every night."

I reached up and put my hand on his cheek. "You really didn't like it when I had to stay overnight in the city, huh?"

He turned his head, kissing my palm, before he stepped forward into me, face down in my shoulder as his hands slid up under my shirt and touched my skin. I trembled in his arms, the feel of his callused palms on my body making my pulse jump.

"Rand!" I was surprised when he bent and threw me over his shoulder, carried me to a nearby tree, dropped me on my feet, spun me around, and shoved me up against it.

"No, I didn't like it at all. You should be home when I'm home, period."

I didn't have time to speak, to argue with him, to tell him that his ideas about a mate were antiquated, before he reached down and dragged the T-shirt up over my head. I tried to turn, but he held me still, his mouth between my shoulder blades, kissing, licking, sucking on my skin. I got hard with the feel of his hands working open my buckle and belt, freeing my cock but nothing else, making no move to get me naked.

"Your skin makes me fuckin' crazy," he confessed, his voice low and husky, so sexy.

He kissed his way down to the small of my back and then turned me around in his arms, kneeling, hands fisted in my jeans as he licked the engorged head of my cock.

"Oh God, Rand," I whispered hoarsely, my hands clutching his shoulders as I pushed into his mouth, watching his lips slide over my swollen shaft, taking me in until his nose was buried in my groin.

I pulled back, and shoved back in hard, fucking his mouth, feeling his hands gripping my ass now through the denim, savoring his hot, wet mouth

and his tongue swirling around my cock.

"Rand," I rasped out. "Gonna come."

He tightened his grip on my ass, forcing me down his throat harder, faster, and I came undone under his hands, in his mouth. He swallowed everything, sucked me clean, and then rose and kissed me ravenously.

Tasting myself on him was so hot, I moaned loudly, sucking on his lips, biting gently but firmly, letting him know he was not getting away.

He smiled as he deepened the kiss, making it slower, deeper, ravaging my mouth.

The moan became a whimper, and when I was breathless and shaking, he shoved me back, unbuckled and unfastened himself and shoved his jeans down to his ankles. I was about to drop to my knees in the cool grass in the shade of the tree, but he told me to take off my jeans and ride him.

I smiled when I saw the butter packet from the diner where we'd had lunch. "That is not lube," I chuckled, watching as he squirted the imitation butter spread onto the palm of his hand and slathered it over his cock. "It's gonna get everywhere, and it won't come off after."

"Like I give a fuck about after," he told me, and I saw the heat and need in his steady gaze.

He watched me with hungry eyes as I peeled out of my jeans and stepped over him.

"You're gonna have grass plastered to your ass."

"I only care about your ass, Stef," he said, his voice a deep rumble in his chest. "Now ride your cowboy."

I shook my head. "That's so cheesy." I smiled, my breath shaky as I got down on my knees, straddling his thighs before taking hold of his throbbing cock and lining it up with my suddenly fluttering hole.

"I'm gonna come just lookin' at ya," he croaked out, and I saw the desperation and his desire.

"Come inside me," I exhaled, lowering myself over him slowly, letting him feel my channel ripple around him, the muscles tightening and relaxing, swallowing him, until I was completely impaled.

His hands gripped my thighs tight, and when I lifted up only to plunge back down, he yelled my name.

"Tell me, Rand."

"Don't pull away. Just lemme feel you."

When I was on top, Rand liked it when I pressed down into him and pushed. He loved my inner walls holding him, liked to have me wrapped around him, squeezing. When he was on top, he liked driving into me, thrusting deep, but our present position was his favorite.

"You're mine."

And there could never be any doubt of the ownership he demanded and which I blissfully gave.

After we swam naked in the creek, we had climbed out, changed back into our jeans, shoved our underwear into my boots—they needed to be washed—and were lying there together on the end of the tiny dock, feet dangling in the water, baking under the late August sun. I could hear the lazy buzz of insects, a splash now and then as a fish hit the surface of the water, and the sound of the leaves on the trees as the breeze blew through them.

"Best day ever," I told him, turning my head so I could look at him, his fingers laced behind his head, eyes closed.

His short, wavy, black hair was curling around his ears and sticking to the back of his neck, and his long eyelashes looked dark even against the tan of his face. The man spent his whole life outside in the sun, and only I had made him wear sunscreen and slathered his face at night with moisturizer. He thought it was stupid. I didn't want him to get skin cancer and leave me. Leaving me was a big deal; he wasn't going to let any other man have me. He carried sunscreen in his truck now.

Looking at him, I couldn't help reaching out and running my hand over the wide, muscular chest and down the deep groove in his abdomen to the hard, flat stomach. Rand Holloway did not have gym muscles like I did. I was toned and defined, my own physique reminiscent of the guys in an Abercrombie & Fitch catalog, purposely acquired, whereas Rand actually used his body every single day. He lifted and pulled and dragged things heavier than him. He wrestled animals to the ground, carried fence posts, and swung a hammer. There was a great physicality to his everyday life, and it showed in every carved, hard inch of his massive frame.

"Come closer," he drawled out, ending with a yawn.

But I was engrossed with looking at him.

The glossy black hair that fell into his bright turquoise-blue eyes, the thick eyebrows that arched dangerously, and his sinful lips that twisted into half a smile whenever he saw me turned me inside out on a regular basis. The man was strength and heat and sex wrapped up in thick muscles and warm sleek skin. I watched women, and a few men, respond to the raw physical presence of Rand Holloway and always understood their trembling reaction. He was powerful and sensual, and when he smiled, which he hardly did around anyone other than his family, his men, and me, it became suddenly hard to breathe.

Everyone who had ever seen Rand Holloway smile wanted to see it again. They enjoyed watching the Technicolor-blue eyes glint, and witness the lines in the corner of those magnificent eyes crinkle in half. But if, by some miracle, he laughed with you, was comfortable enough to let down that barrier and just be himself, treated you like family, Christ, you were hooked for life. The deep rumbling laughter was a sound you never forgot, and he became a drug you had to have. Not that he ever noticed anyone's reaction to him because he didn't care if people liked him or not. The only things he cared about were his family, his ranch, the people who lived on it and called it home, and me. There was no way not to love a man like that, heart and soul.

"Stef."

I lifted my eyes, and he caught me in his blue gaze.

"Put your head down."

I stretched out, laid my head on his bicep, and slid my denim clad leg over his thigh.

He grunted. "You know, I know why you don't wanna use the joint checking account."

And just like that, we were back to our earlier discussion.

I was quiet because I didn't want to fight. I had worked all my life, depended on no one but myself for anything. My stepfather had thrown me out when I was fourteen. My mother had stood there and watched, slamming the door in my face. When I had pounded on the door to be let back in, it was thrown open and the beating had commenced. And while I had no worry that Rand would ever physically hurt me, there was still the

possibility that if he ever got tired of me, learned to hate me, that I could be put out of my home. I could never allow that to happen to me again. Money was my security net, money I made myself.

"Hello?"

"Rand, I don't wanna talk about—"

"I won't ever tell you to pack your things and go, Stef."

He knew me so well, knew all the fears that rode me.

"I swear it."

"Rand—"

"I won't."

"Just—"

"Believe me. Believe in me. Stefan... please."

God, the man knew I doubted him, doubted his love, the depth of it, the forever of it, and still he loved me.

"I know you love me, and I know you wanna be here, and I know you still worry."

Shit.

"Look at me."

I rolled my head sideways, and we were eye to eye, only inches separating us. It was very intimate; there was no hiding that close.

"If you want, I can take my name off the joint account, and it can just be yours, and that way you'll know it can never be taken from you. I'll still put money in it, but I won't touch it at all. Would that be better?"

"That's what's called being kept, Rand, and no... that would not be better in the least."

"Fuck," he grumbled. "I don't mean it like—"

"I know how you meant it," I assured him. "It's a very generous offer."

"Christ, now you're making it sound dirty," he groaned, and I sat up as he moved his hands, raking them through his thick hair.

"Very generous for a guy like me." I smiled, turning to look down at him, waggling my eyebrows. "A man with my background."

"Stefan." He warned me.

"A guy from the wrong side of the tracks."

"It ain't funny."

"It's a little funny," I chuckled.

"You don't... you ain't hearin' me," he said, and my laughter died in my throat when his voice cracked. He sat up beside me, crossing his legs so his left knee bumped me. "For a long time, all the guys would go home at night to their wives and their children and lit-up houses that smelled like food and got to hear all the good and all the bad that happened that day. I used to go home, and there weren't none of that."

"Rand," I began, putting my hand on his knee.

"Lemme finish," he said gently, taking my hand, sliding his fingers between mine, pressing my palm against him. "After you came, though, suddenly I'm just as excited to go home as everybody else. I open my front door and the music is on, and the lights are on, and the place smells amazing, and goddamn, Stef, even when I was married before, it wasn't like that. Even if you're runnin' late and I get in first, just you walkin' in the house makes it feel different. And I get it, ya know? You're it, you're my home."

I looked away because I was nothing. I was an orphan, and he had a home and a family and a ranch and everyone counting on him, and I was just... how could Rand want to build on me? How was I a foundation for anything?

"Hey."

I turned back, slowly, taking a breath.

His hand went to my cheek, his thumb sliding over my bottom lip, and I saw the warmth infuse his eyes, saw them darken, soften, because he was looking at me.

"You don't really know what you did today, so I'm gonna tell you."

I nodded because my voice was gone.

"When you told me that you weren't gonna look for a job in Dallas, I knew for sure you wanted to stay with me and have a home."

My focus became breathing.

"I mean, before that, when you were runnin' back and forth, doin' all that driving, well, maybe you were tryin' to keep one foot in your old life and one in your new one, ya know?"

I did know and that was exactly what I had been doing.

"I saw you needin' air. Saw you gettin' all panicky 'cause your life was fallin' into place around you. The happier you got, the more you started fittin' in and gettin' comfortable, the more you started pacin' like an animal that was caged up. You were snappin' at everyone, ready to bite and scratch to get away, and sick that you had to. I ain't never seen a man who so wanted to belong and who was scared to, all at the same time. It makes me tired just watchin' you wrestle with yourself."

I cleared my throat. "So I'm a crazy person who—"

"Just... hush. You showed me how it was gonna be 'cause when it was time to decide, you chose me and the ranch and your life here."

He narrowed his eyes, and as he squinted, I saw how red-rimmed they were. I had no idea that anything I could ever do would touch him so deeply.

"It's why I can barely keep my hands off you. That's why I attacked you in your office today, 'cause it's *your* office. It's where you're fixin' to be because of me."

I finally understood. To Rand, until he physically saw the reality of my new job, he had not let himself believe it. To me, the space, my cubicle at the community college, was a dump. To Rand, it represented me putting down roots.

"You told me that you wanted to belong to me, and today I believe it."

I looked away from him because my eyes filled and my vision blurred with hot tears.

"Along with workin' there at the college, I still want you to oversee the Grillmaster account, you hear?"

I nodded.

"And if it don't work out for you at the school, you can just do that, all right?"

But how would that work?

"Are you afraid of how it will look to everyone if you work at the ranch?"

That was some of it, I would admit to that. "People will think I'm sponging off you," I said to the creek instead of Rand.

"But you'll know different."

"I just can't be a—"

"Soon no one will wonder why you're on the ranch, once we have kids."

Wait. Kids?

What? "What?" I asked breathlessly, my head swiveling around to look at him. God, when had I missed him planning his whole life with me in it?

"You'll have to stay home and take care of them."

Even though he had said kids before, in the past, all I had ever heard was child. But I processed the word that time. Kids. As in plural. As in more than one. As in *them*.

When had he decided that he wanted to have children with me? "I have no idea what you're even talking about right now. You—"

"I wanted you to practice takin' care of me so you'll be ready to take care of your children, and I was so scared that you wouldn't. I was thinkin' just maybe you were ready to leave me, but then you took this job so you could keep on seein' me and cookin' for me and—"

"I am not your wife!" I yelled at him. "And I won't be made to take on the role of—"

"I know that, but you have to get ready to take care of your children!" *My children?*

"You're gonna be the one who picks 'em up from school every day. You'll be the one who helps 'em with their homework and watches them wash up and makes their dinner. I'll be the one who plays with 'em and watches TV and talks to 'em at the dinner table. I'll be their father, and you'll be—"

"Oh God." I couldn't breathe.

"I asked Charlotte if she would be inclined to help us start our family, and she said she'd help 'cause she always wanted to have babies with you anyhow."

Jesus Christ, the man was planning on putting me into a Norman Rockwell painting. "Rand—"

"No! I will not discuss this with you. The time to talk is over and done. When you asked me if I wanted you and I said yes, I started planning my whole life right then. When you lost your job, you decided to only look as far as Lubbock for a new one so you could come home every night to me. That tells me all I need to know, Stef."

Running was easy; staying was hard.

"I ain't tryin' to take anything from you, least of all your freedom."

"I know," I told him as he pulled me close. I ended up lying between his legs, my back curled into his chest, his arms draped across my collarbone.

"I drive you nuts, huh?"

"You make me fuckin' crazy."

"I'm sorry." I snickered because I wasn't at all. He had to deal with me, thorns and all.

"No, you ain't."

"Rand—"

"I love you."

I turned and looked at him over my shoulder.

"Don't ever leave me. I won't recover, okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay." He exhaled, like he had been holding his breath. "Christ, you're a giant pain in the ass."

There could be no argument.

Chapter 2

There were two new cars in the driveway when I pulled up to the house, so I was wondering who was there as I grabbed my groceries and went up to the porch. As I reached for the screen door, the front door opened. There was a man in my house I had never seen in my life, and he was talking to someone over his shoulder, so he didn't immediately see me.

"Knock it off, Gin," he laughed, shaking his head. "I don't care what anybody says. Rand Holloway being gay is a buncha shit. That man nailed more—"

"Glenn!"

He laughed at whoever Gin was as he pushed open the screen door making me back up.

"Excuse me."

His head swiveled to me and his eyes, brilliant and blue, widened. "Oh shit, man, I'm sorry. I didn't see…. Sorry." He winced, apologizing, easing the door closed so it didn't hit me.

I stepped sideways and plastered on a big smile as he cracked the screen door again.

"Let's try this again, huh?"

As soon as I was bracing the door open, he leaned back and extended his hand to me.

"I'm Glenn Holloway, Rand's cousin. I suppose he forgot to tell you that we were coming as well."

"Who else did he forget to tell," I asked, after clearing my throat.

"You and every other hand on this ranch." He smiled sheepishly, raking his fingers through the same glossy black hair that Rand had. His hair was shorter than Rand's, but just as thick. "We're all leavin' day after tomorrow for my brother Zach's ranch, but 'til then, we're stayin' here."

Uh-huh.

"Are you the cook?"

The cook?

"Do you have a room here or in the bunkhouse?"

"Unfortunately, I'm not the cook." I forced a smile. "Excuse me, can I...?"

"Oh yeah, sorry, where are my manners?"

I could venture a guess.

As I stepped into the great room, I saw another man and two women. The television was on, and it looked like they had made themselves comfortable with chips and salsa and margaritas. There was a pitcher on the coffee table as well as a bowl with salt on it and wedges of limes.

"Hi there." One of the women smiled wide, standing up as I moved across the room to her. "I'm Ginger Holloway, that guy's cousin," she said, tipping her head back toward the door where Glenn was. "And this here is my brother Brent and his girlfriend Emily."

"I'm Stefan," I told her, offering her my hand.

"Well, it's a pleasure," she told me, taking my hand and squeezing tight.

I turned to Brent, who rose, wiped his palms on his jeans, and then extend his hand to me. After we shook, it was Emily's turn.

"So Stefan," Ginger said, returning my attention to her. "How long have you worked on the ranch?"

I was saved from having to say anything by another woman coming in from the kitchen.

"Gin, there isn't anything else in there but wine and beer and coffee. Rand must—" She saw me. "Oh, hi there. Did you bring food?"

"I had planned to cook for two," I told the stranger.

Her smile was big, as were her baby-blue eyes. Her short blonde bob made her look like a pixie. She rushed across the room to offer me her hand. "Hi, I'm the test, Lisa Whitten. Nice to meet you."

"Stefan," I said, taking her hand. "Test?"

Her laugh was nice, lilting. "Yeah, apparently I got invited along to what I thought would be a nice relaxing weekend on a dude ranch to check and see if their cousin, your boss, was really and truly gay." She put her hands on her hips and struck a pose for me. "Apparently my hotliness is to be put to the test."

The room erupted in laughter.

I nodded.

She was cute, no way around it. Her tan was golden, her legs long, all her curves were perfect, and she had sharp elfin features. She was the kind of woman who men would turn and watch and drool over, like Barbie with a short 'do.

"I hafta tell you." She gave me a wicked smile, leaning closer to me, her voice dropping. "After laying eyes on the man, I'm not really that upset about being tricked into this anymore."

"Because my cousin is hot!" Ginger whooped from where she was on the couch.

"You guys?"

One more woman stepped from the kitchen.

"Do you know if Rand has Wi-Fi out here? I have got to check my email."

"No," I answered her. "Just a cable modem."

The woman looked up at me and smiled. "I don't suppose it's anywhere in the house I can go."

"His office is upstairs, three doors down."

"Would it be okay, you think, if I just hooked up my laptop?"

"Sure, just unplug his computer and hook yours up. He won't care as long as you put it back the way you found it."

"Thank you," she gushed, hand out for me. "Kim Palmer. Great to meet you."

"Stefan Joss," I said, taking the offered hand.

"You're saving my life, Stefan," she sighed. "Ginny and I own a catering business in Austin, and apparently we had some screwups today that I have to fix."

"I'll go with you," Ginger sighed, getting up off the couch, margarita glass in hand. "But I really hope Rand gets back soon 'cause all tequila and no food is going to make me a little loopy."

"Going to?" Brent called over to her.

"Shut up." She giggled at him, following Kim up the stairs as I made my way to the kitchen.

Dumping the groceries on the counter, I was torn between being thrilled that I was home and wishing to God that his cousins were not.

There was a tap on the back door, and when I opened it, I was faced with Everett Hartline, one of Rand's men.

"Hey." I smiled at him, moving sideways out of his way. "You wanna come in?"

"No, I was just supposed to let the dogs in the house and stay there to make sure they didn't scare his kin."

I arched an eyebrow at him. "You're making sure the pack doesn't frighten his cousins?"

He grinned. "You know, before I worked on this ranch, I only ever worked with border collies or heelers, Australian cattle dogs and such. Rand Holloway's the only man I know who keeps Rhodesian Ridgebacks on his ranch."

They were beautiful dogs, Rand's hounds from hell, but they were big, all between seventy-five to eighty pounds of muscle. So it made sense actually, because while they were not vicious or aggressive, tending to leave strangers alone instead of attacking at first sight, the people were on their home turf, and so they would be protective of Rand and the house and me.

I loved them all, which had amazed me. I was not the type who liked animals as a rule, but ever since I had been on the ranch, calves and dogs and horses had taken over my heart. I was perfectly content to sit in front of the fire on a cold winter day, watching television under a warm puppy pile of fur. There was one of the hell hounds in particular, Bella, who had staked

her claim on me. She was more my dog than Rand's, and he had said on a number of occasions that as soon as he could, he was going to visit his favorite breeder in Biloxi and get another puppy to raise on the ranch. Bella was apparently no good to him anymore as a working dog since she had decided that she wanted to be my pet. Supposedly I distracted her more than I did the others, and she would rather sit at my feet than run after cattle.

"Stef?"

"Sorry." I grinned at him. "I think I'm tired. Where are the dogs now?"

I heard a yell at the same time from the living room.

"I'd say they were on the porch," he grunted, turning away. "But you're here, so you can deal with them."

"You wanna stay and eat?"

"No." He yawned, looking back at me. "Me, Jace, Chris, and Pierce are headed out to the Rooster to get laid."

"Have a good time," I called after him. The Rooster was a honky-tonk I had been in once. It had been more than enough. Between the sawdust on the floor and the music that resembled nothing I had ever heard, my plan was to never go again. "And good luck getting lucky."

"Don't need no luck, son, when you look like this."

I rolled my eyes and shut the door before walking back out into the living room. It sounded like a bad horror movie, the snarling and growling going on outside the front door.

"Jesus Christ," Lisa moaned, looking terrified, as Glenn looked out the window.

Brent had a smile for me as did Emily.

"Goddamn, Rand, who keeps dogs that big just to herd cattle?"

"What is that?" Ginger asked, having come halfway down the stairs.

"Just the dogs," I told her, slipping past Glenn and opening the door.

Everyone yelled behind me at once.

The second I opened the door, the barking stopped.

"Seriously," I told them, "the noise is out of control."

Six faces were looking up at me expectantly.

"Stefan, they don't come in the house, do they?" Lisa asked tentatively.

"Yeah, Rand doesn't like the dogs loose on the ranch at night unless he's with them. The dogs are hard to see in the dark, and he worries that anyone coming down the drive might accidentally hit them."

I stepped sideways, and they all came in and clustered around me, five tails in a blur of motion, five wet noses touching my hands. The sixth dog, Bella, was dancing around me, whimpering and whining, contorting her body into a half moon as she tried to shove her head under my palm.

"C'mon." I yawned, turning for the kitchen.

I heard their feet on the wooden floor, the jingle of their collars as they trotted after me. I held the swinging door open for them and then let it shut behind me.

"You're such an attention whore," I told my girl Bella, crouching down to pet her. I was instantly covered in dog. Her nose went into my eye as the others licked my face, my nose, my throat, and pranced in circles around me. "This is so gross," I laughed at them.

I petted each one, scratched ears, stroked backs, rubbed and finally hugged each one. When I finally rose, I went to the pantry to get their dishes down for water and food, and talked to them as I moved around. They were all sitting there, tails thumping, watching me. Rand used to only have four, but as the ranch grew, so did his pack. He had six now and would soon have seven once he went to pick up the new puppy.

When the door swung open, the dogs moved fast, forming a phalanx around me, which was funny to see, for me, but not quite as amusing for Glenn and Ginger.

Beau was the undisputed leader. He was the biggest, and he had been with Rand the longest, five years. He looked pretty scary, hackles up, teeth bared, ears laid back, snarling. If we were outside, he would have ignored them, but he was penned in, and there was nothing between them and me except him. He went into defense mode that fast.

"Quit it," I told him, touching his head, petting him so he had no choice but to stop and look up at me. "It's okay, honey."

He talked to me, half howl, half bark, chiding me for keeping him from his duty, before he sat down with a huff of air, with what looked like disgust.

"So what is it that you do on the ranch, Stefan?" Ginger asked me, squinting.

I didn't get to say because Lisa yelled from the other room that Rand was back.

The dogs went nuts because Rand was home, and all of them, except Bella, rushed from the kitchen to greet him.

It was funny. Ginger screamed, Glenn abandoned his cousin to get out of the way of the stampede of dogs, and I heard Lisa and then Kim yell from the living room. I finished measuring out the ratio of wet food to dry food in each dog's bowl, and then filled the bowls of water before I washed my hands. I needed a shower, but I wanted to see Rand first.

"Jesus Christ, where the hell did he have to go for groceries?" Glenn groused, throwing open the screen door, shivering in the cold air. "We could have driven to Lubbock and back for how long you took."

I heard boots on the stairs and then a bag of charcoal was shoved hard at Glenn's chest. "If you had given me any kind of warning about this at all, I might've been a little better prepared, asshole. As it is—Beau, get off me and get inside, you stupid—I'm missin' a dog. Where's Bella?"

"There's one standing with Stefan."

"Why the hell you guys couldn't have just called is bullshit, Glenn," Rand grumbled, not listening as he suddenly stepped into the room, dogs spilling in before him. "When Stef gets home, you guys are gonna hafta—"

"Hey," I called over to him softly.

"Stef." He said my name like he'd been hit in the stomach, as he stood there, frozen, staring at me.

"Surprise." I smiled at him.

Bella barked her hello, but didn't leave my side.

"Christ," he growled, walking by the couch, dumping the groceries there before he jogged across the room to me.

"Where are you off to, Mr. Holloway?" I arched an eyebrow at him.

"Shut up," he said before he grabbed my arm, fingers digging into my bicep, and yanked me after him into the kitchen.

I didn't think, couldn't think, and so when he swung me around and threw me up against the refrigerator, I scrambled to get close to him. My arms wrapped around his neck as I pulled him down, my lips parted the moment they sealed to his. I felt the shiver run through him as our tongues tangled, my body pressed tightly against his. I loved to kiss him, could taste him for hours, and feasted on his mouth.

His hands were on my face, holding me still, making sure I couldn't move, couldn't get away. He took full inventory of my teeth and my tonsils and everything else. I finally had to shove him off me to breathe, my head ready to explode. He rested his forehead against mine, both of us panting, heaving for oxygen.

"What are you doing here?"

"I live here." I gave him the same answer I always did.

"You were gonna be late."

"But I had to get here and stop you from falling in love with Lisa," I teased him.

"Stef—"

"Looks like I got here just in time."

"I'm gonna strangle you."

"Wait until I catch my breath," I chuckled.

He lifted his forehead, tipped my head back, and slammed his mouth back down over mine. The kiss was, for the second time, grinding, voracious, and rough. When I was whimpering, rubbing the hardening bulge in my dress pants against his thigh, he broke the kiss, lifting his lips from mine only to dip his head and press the first of many hot, wet kisses to the long column of my throat.

"Glad"—he said hoarsely as he sucked under my jaw—"you're home."

"Where are you going?" I asked him, even though my power to focus was deserting me quickly. My body was beginning to heat. His kisses had a drugging effect on me as well.

"My cousin Zach," he grumbled, and his voice dropped low as he nibbled my chin, "has an emergency. His ranch, once every three months, he turns it into a guest ranch for a week and—"

"What's a guest ranch?" I asked, opening my legs as he pressed his thigh to my groin.

He kissed me instead of answering, sucking my bottom lip into his mouth, biting it gently before easing back to look down at my face.

"Rand?"

"You know what's hot?"

I smiled up at him.

"This," he said, sliding a finger down the divot under my nose. "I don't know why, but it makes me wanna kiss you."

I laughed at him because he was adorable.

"And when your hair sticks up after we've been in bed—also, very hot."

What was hot was the man looking at me like I was the most alluring thing on the planet. He was making my stomach flutter. "What's a guest ranch?"

"Like a dude ranch," he answered, kissing me again, down the side of my throat, licking my skin, nuzzling, tasting.

"Really?"

There was a deep rumble from his chest before his lips sealed back over mine. My hands moved over his chest, feeling the hard pecs and rippling muscles as he tightened his hold on me.

It lasted too long; I couldn't breathe and had to pull back to drag in air. Instantly he bit gently down on my now-swollen lower lip, nibbling, sucking it back inside his hot mouth.

My moan was deep and full of aching, throbbing need.

His answering groan lifted my eyes to his.

"You make those noises, Stef, and I will put you over the table, company or not."

I coughed to try and get my over-stimulated body under control. "So you'll go there, to Zach's ranch, and do what?"

His hands slid off my face, but he didn't move away. Instead he wrapped his strong arms around me, one hand on the small of my back,

pressing me forward. "I'll put people on horses and take 'em off, I'll teach them to rope, and ride, and lead trail rides, all that sort of crap."

"But why? I mean, why do you have to go?"

"'Cause Zach, he always asks his family to help him out because if he pays his own men to be there, then there goes his profit."

"Your guys would do it for free."

He nodded. "They would, but I would never ask them."

"How come you didn't know about this before?"

"He doesn't normally ask me, but I guess he's got himself a bigger group this time than usual, and since he needs the money, he didn't wanna turn down the extra people."

"So you got drafted."

"I got drafted," he agreed.

"He's never called you before."

"Nope, normally he wouldn't, but he's backed into a corner right now, and he didn't have no other option."

"So you're leaving me," I teased him.

"Yessir." He grinned evilly. "For five whole days."

"I could die from that."

"Me too." The raw, needy sound of his voice made everything tighten down deep in my stomach as he leaned his head forward to kiss me again.

I lifted to meet him and the kiss became a needy whimpering, grinding, clothing-in-the-way, hands-everywhere connection in seconds. One day our chemistry would stop being raw and incendiary and would find a less passionate level. It just hadn't happened yet.

"Hey, Rand," Glenn called as he exploded into the room, "what the fuck is—oh."

When Rand's cousin opened the kitchen door, he found my boyfriend's mouth hovering over mine, his hand cupping my ass, the other in my hair, and my arms wrapped around his neck. Really, even if I'd drawn him a picture, or taken one, it couldn't be any clearer. So his next question seemed ridiculous.

"What are you doing in here?"

I tried to pull free, but Rand drew me closer.

"I'm mauling Stef. What's it look like?"

Even with the visual, it took Rand looking at him like he was dumb as dirt and me squinting at him for the scene in front of him to sink in.

"And you wasted your time invitin' that gal along, Glenn," Rand told his cousin. "I got all I need right here."

At which point Glenn Holloway finally got it.

I took my time in the shower, and afterward I simply pulled all the water out of my hair, ran product through it, and messed it back up. I was home; I didn't need to be pretty. It felt good to be in a worn pair of jeans and big thick socks and a long-sleeved T-shirt. I wanted to eat and lie around and watch TV sprawled out in Rand's lap. I was hoping it wasn't going to be weird downstairs, but if it was, I would come lay in bed. And going to bed with Rand... just the idea sent a flash of heat over my skin. I wondered if I just stayed upstairs how long it would take for him to join me.

It was cute that the second I got out of the bathroom, Bella was there on the other side of the door waiting for me. Her huff of breath made me smile. She sounded like she was irritated.

"I take long showers," I said defensively. The head tip let me know that she had no earthly idea what I was talking about.

Minutes later I was at the top of the stairs ready to go down when Rand appeared at the bottom.

"I wanna talk to you," he said, smiling up at me.

"Talk," I told him, descending toward him, staring into his eyes. The heat that was returned made my stomach flutter.

"I'm leavin' in the morning."

"So you said."

"C'mere."

When I was a step above him so that we were eye to eye, I stopped. "Will you really be gone a week?"

"No, four days actually. I'll get to Zach's place tomorrow afternoon, and then bright and early Thursday morning the guests will arrive. It's four days there at his ranch, it's done Sunday morning, and then I'll be home the same night."

I nodded. "So it's not like you'll actually be working his ranch like you do yours."

"Ours."

"Ours," I repeated, putting my hand on his cheek, liking the feel of the firm skin and stubble under my palm.

"I'm so glad you came home early."

"I would've been here in another hour anyway."

"Yeah, I know," he said as he leaned forward, kissing my cheek, the motion tender and sexy all at once. "But sooner is always better."

I sighed heavily as his nose brushed over the side of my neck.

"You smell good."

It was amazing how smoky and low Rand's voice got whenever he talked and kissed me at the same time. The gruff, low growl never failed to make me hard.

"I wish I didn't have to go."

I looked up into his face. "I could come."

He shook his head. "All the spots on the guest list are filled."

"No, Rand, I could help you."

His snort of laughter made me scowl.

"Rand." I lowered my voice, the warning there.

He cleared his throat, tightening his arms around me when I tried to shove free.

I growled at him.

"Love," he tried hard to stifle the chuckle. "Just because you live on a ranch doesn't mean you can ride a horse."

"Rand—"

"Stef." His smile was big and wicked and made his eyes glitter. "Baby

"Don't call me baby, and I can ride a horse, Rand."

"Correction, you can ride your horse because you basically raised her after her mama passed, but any other horse would not allow you to just sit there and do nothing."

"What're you—"

"That horse does everything, Stef. You just hold the reins. She runs when she wants, she walks when she wants, rides into streams when she wants," he chuckled, his hand sliding down my back, slipping up under the T-shirt to my skin. "She loves you, same as that damn fool dog, but any other horse and you're gonna break your neck."

```
"Rand—"
```

"I like your neck in one piece."

"I'm going," I told him matter-of-factly. "Case closed."

"No."

"Yes."

"Absolutely not," he said indulgently.

I arched an eyebrow for him.

"Baby, it's not how you think."

"I'm not thinking anything, and quit with the baby."

"Stef—"

"Excuse me."

We turned to find Rand's cousin Ginger descending the stairs behind us. He let me go as she took the final step to the floor, but one of his hands moved to the small of my back and stayed there. Her own was instantly offered.

"It's nice to meet you," I told her as we shook.

"I feel like such an ass," she said, biting her bottom lip, her hand squeezing mine. "What you must think of me."

I smiled at her.

"I just... I didn't know that you were living here, and when Glenn said that I should invite Lisa, I thought it would be funny." She breathed out.

I eased my hand from hers as Rand slid his up to the back of my neck, his fingers massaging gently, tenderly.

"I had no idea that you and Rand had been together for two years already. No one tells us anything."

"That's because when my mother got remarried, your father, along with Glenn's, stopped speaking to her," Rand reminded Ginger. "Maybe if your dad, good old Uncle Cyrus, wasn't such a prick, you would know more about my life."

"Rand," I scolded him.

"Whatever," he grumbled. "I'm going for Zach, not for you or Glenn or anybody else. And you better tell your girlfriend that she's shit outta luck about marrying this rancher, all right?"

She gasped as he leaned in, kissed my temple, and turned around, walking toward the kitchen, yelling.

"Oh my God, he's so mad," she said, her voice tiny.

"He's just upset because he doesn't like to leave his ranch or me," I said gently. "And tomorrow he has to do both."

She nodded as I saw tears fill her eyes.

"He's just loud."

"He's been scary as long as I've known him."

"Really?" I chuckled. "You think Rand's scary?"

"You don't?"

"No," I assured her. "Never."

She nodded.

"Tell me how you guys are related."

She wiped under her eyes. "Well, Well, my father, and Brent's and Brandon's, is Cyrus Holloway, and he and Rand and Charlotte's daddy, James, are brothers along with Rayland, Glenn and Zach's father, and Tyler, who lives here with you all."

Rand's Uncle Tyler and I were very good friends, had been for longer than Rand and I had been together. I used to see him when his niece Charlotte, my best friend and Rand's sister, and I came to visit.

"Hey."

I looked over my shoulder, and Glenn was there with Brent.

"Stefan?"

"Yes?"

He shoved his hands down deep into the pockets of his jeans. "I'm real sorry I didn't put it together who you were. I should've asked."

"And I should have just told you," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Rand and his family and my dad and ours, we're having us a little problem with Rand's mama gettin' remarried as she still owns a portion of the grazing land in King, and my daddy thinks she should just sign it over to him since she ain't a Holloway no more."

"But Rand is."

"Yeah, but Rand has his ranch, and even though it don't do as well as mine or Zach's, it's still enough to take care of him and provide for his family."

I scowled at him. "How is the Red Diamond not doing well?"

He gave me a patronizing smile. "I know you don't know much about ranching, but there should be a lot of traffic around here if you're doing well."

"Rand sells his beef over the Internet mostly," I told him, trying not to look at him like he was stupid. "He has a company in Lubbock that deals with distribution and a PR company in Amarillo that does his marketing. Did he tell you about his contract with Grillmaster or did he fail to mention that?"

He looked like I'd hit him.

I waited.

"He--"

"Rand just bought and sold four non-working ranches here in Winston to the developer Mitchell Powell who plans to create a huge resort that will bring in millions of dollars in revenue to this county and the next. He's building a school in Hillman in the fall. How does any of that say that his ranch is not doing well?"

"I... my father said his ranch was failing."

"Twelve years ago." I was indignant. "But I assure you that the Red Diamond is much better off than yours or your brother Zach's."

We were all standing there silently as Rand yelled for everyone to come eat. As silent minutes ticked by, he suddenly appeared beside me.

"What are we doing?"

Glenn turned to look at him. "Stef tells us that you're the one who got the Grillmaster account, Rand. Is that true?"

He glared at his cousin. "So you're the guy who didn't have distribution rights before you bid on the contract?"

"Yes."

Rand nodded and then shrugged. "I ship my beef all over the US, Glenn. You should think about that side of the business. Only selling to local businesses will not keep you in the black and allows no room for growth. I diversified before I met Stef, but went further with it afterward so that no amount of stupid-ass redneck prejudice would keep me from providing for my family and the families of my men. Unlike your ranch, you won't see any people driving down the road to the house, but my server is clogged with orders."

Glenn was ashen, and I wondered why.

"I could buy you and your father's ranch and Zach's if I wanted. Tell that to your ignorant cracker father."

There was some really bad blood between the two families that I was only right that second hearing about.

Glenn was suddenly in Rand's face, finger poking into his collarbone. His face was red and he was close to snarling. "My father wants that land up in King, Rand, and so do I. Your mother has no right to—"

"You want the land?" Rand asked icily, stepping back, sideways, so that I was suddenly behind him, shielded. "Buy me out."

"I knew it!" he crowed. "Your mother signed it over to you!"

"The minute she remarried, the rights reverted to me, asshole. The land is mine now, Glenn, so you can tell your father that a Holloway owns it."

"You—"

"If he wants it, like I said, he can buy me out. I can graze my cattle other places."

"Got lots of other land, do you.?"

"Yessir, I do."

"You know we don't have that kind of—"

"Then fuck you, Glenn," he snarled at him, trembling when I put my hands on his hips, willing him to calm down. "That land was my father's, and I have as much right to it as any of you."

"It's family land, and you've got no right to it!"

"I've got the same rights as you!"

"You're not welcome there," he voice was cold, leveling his gaze on Rand, "and neither is your boyfriend."

"The land is just as much mine as yours, Glenn, and there ain't shit you can do about it."

He balled up his fists, and Rand did the same, twisting into a defensive stance, prepared to fight.

"No!" I yelled, and both men turned to me. "Not in my house."

"Fuck you," Glenn barked at me.

"Don't speak to him," Rand warned his cousin. "Don't even look at him."

The world swirled around us. Profanity flew between the two men, Ginger was crying, her friends were clueless about what was going on, and in the middle of everything, Brent told Glenn to calm down because he was frightening Emily.

"Fuck you," Glenn yelled at him. "You're such a pussy-whipped piece of—"

At which point, Brent, who I'd thought was quiet and subdued and sort of dorky, ended up hurling himself at Glenn. It was chaos then until I heard Rand's Uncle Tyler, Glenn and Ginger's Uncle Tyler too, come in and yell.

"What in the blue blazes is goin' on in here?"

No one said blue blazes in real life, and that was funny. What was not, was the rifle he was holding in his hand.

Everyone froze because of it.

"I thought it was some kind of home invasion thing," he announced to us.

"You're watching too much TV," I told him.

He shrugged in agreement. "Now what in Sam Hill is goin' on?"

Really, the man's expressions were hysterical.

As Rand threw up his hands; I realized that no one was going anywhere now that Tyler was there to mediate.

"Here, honey." He gestured over to Lisa. "Come stand by me."

I rolled my eyes at the twinkle in his eye as she walked over to him.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Rand groaned.

I rounded on him and leaped, and he had to scramble to grab me. As I wrapped arms and legs around him, I heard the deep contented sigh that came up out of the man. He brushed the hair back from my face and looked into my eyes.

"Now you see there," Tyler mumbled. "If Stefan weren't home, you'd all be dead now."

And I smiled as Rand nodded.

Chapter 3

I had been really confused until Tyler explained it all to me. All the times I had been to the ranch before Rand and I had gotten together, his extended family had been there and I had been warmly welcomed into the fold. That my being gay was suddenly a problem made no sense.

"You ain't never seen no Holloways," Tyler told me. "You seen Millers only."

"What?"

So Tyler told me that those men, and women, the ones who had been kind and funny and everything else, were Rand's mother's family, the Millers. They all lived close by in Lubbock and Midland and Slaton and Paducah.

"Then I never met Rand's father's side of the family."

"That's right," he nodded. "'Cept for me."

I'd had no idea.

As I watched Glenn and the women leave a half an hour later, I apologized to Rand for causing the rift between him and his family.

"It's got nothing to do with you," he said, grabbing my hand and yanking me after him upstairs.

"Rand—"

"Stop," he cut me off, starting up the stairs, pulling me along.

I realized suddenly what was happening. "Rand you still need to feed your cousin Brent and his girlfriend, and you have to pack and—"

"After," he told me, having reached the top of the stairs and dragging me down the hall with him. "And the food is there. They just need to eat it."

"But you need to be down there playing good host."

"Fuck it. They know I ain't one, and Tyler can entertain 'em just fine."

"But I should—Rand! You don't just fuck your boyfriend in the middle of dinner and make people wait to talk to you and—"

"You're not my boyfriend," he said flatly, shoving me through the doorway only to kick the bedroom door shut behind him. "You're my partner."

I was about to remind him that he was not raised in a barn when my eyes met his, and I forgot what I was going to say.

The man's gaze was all heat.

I licked my lips, and his eyes went right there before he lunged forward and grabbed me. His lips met mine in a frenzied kiss as his hands went everywhere else. When he pulled back, I gasped for air, knowing that my mouth would be taken again fast. I opened my eyes a second later when they weren't.

He was staring at me.

"What are you doing?" I smiled at him, my own hands on his hot skin, having burrowed up under the T-shirt and flannel one he was wearing over it.

The muscles in his jaw corded as he shivered slightly. "I'm lookin' at you. Christ, I could look at you every day for the rest of my life and never get tired of it."

His gaze never failed to make my stomach roll over because I could tell, anyone could, that I was cherished.

"You're so beautiful, Stef," he sighed, his hand on my cheek, "and your eyes, your gorgeous green eyes, just kill me."

I stepped back and pulled my T-shirt up over my head. I watched his hot eyes narrow as he gazed at me, and I was keenly aware of his desire. His breathing, the bulge in his jeans, his hands that reached for me—all of him wanted all of me.

I walked backward out of reach, unbuckling my belt, working fast to get out of my jeans and the briefs underneath. When I was naked, I let him

reach me, and him being fully clothed and me without anything on brought a throaty moan up from his chest.

He pressed against me, his hand fondling my ass, and when I pushed back, he grabbed a handful and squeezed tight. My reaction was unrestrained, primitive, the throaty moan torn out of me.

"Jesus, Stef," he murmured before he shoved me down hard onto the bed, and I watched as he frantically went to work on his own clothes.

He yanked off his boots and his flannel shirt, but his jeans were only opened, and the T-shirt was still on when he crawled up on the bed and grabbed my hips. I was rolled over onto my stomach and yanked up onto my hands and knees.

"You have the most beautiful backside I have ever seen in my life," he told me, his hand sliding down the slope of my back up over my bottom. "It is round and firm and just perfect. Do you know what you do to me? Just seeing the curve of your ass in your jeans makes me hard."

It was good to know, I thought, as I wiggled it for him.

"Stef," he groaned his husky tenor sounding like he was in pain.

"Rand, come—oh."

His mouth, his delicious, hot, wet mouth was on my ass. The bite on my right cheek made me moan, his hands spreading me stopped my breathing, and when his tongue slid over my entrance, I choked out his name.

"There you go," he said, before he swirled his tongue inside me, deeper and deeper, before I felt him add a finger.

I jolted under him, and I was aware of him moving, lifting his lips from me even as the finger remained. I pushed back, felt him moving, and heard the jostle of the nightstand and the snap of the flip-top cap.

"Oh God, Rand, please."

A second finger, slicked with lube, joined the first, and the burn felt incredible.

I shoved back, and he made a noise in the back of his throat, scissoring his fingers apart, gently, slowly, but firmly, insistently.

"God, Stef, you're trying to suck my fingers down into you, and I want it to be my cock. I need it to be my cock."

"Then fuck me."

"Jesus, you're beautiful, the lines of you, your hair and your eyes and your warm skin and your ass... fuck."

He liked to look at me, loved to touch me, smooth his hands all over me before he had to get closer, had to be joined with me, sink his flesh inside of mine.

I levered back on his fingers, the burn, the pinch, having already been replaced with heart-pounding, blood-tingling anticipation.

"Stef, I can't—this is as ready as you're gonna be."

If he didn't do something, I was going to scream. "Rand... baby...."

His hands gripped my hips hard, and he thrust inside of me in one powerful forward thrust. I had no idea he could feel so good.

"Rand!"

And since he knew the sound of my voice, he didn't worry that he'd hurt me. He just eased out, only to plunge back in again, harder, faster, stretching me, filling me, as he held me tight, not letting me move.

I lifted up, taking him in deeper, and the strangled moan came out of him even as he ordered me to grab my dick because he couldn't. There was no way for him to stroke me off. He didn't have the concentration. His control was shattered by the adrenaline from earlier, and now he wanted only to be buried to his balls in my ass, hammer into me, and take me hard.

I begged him for it.

"Stef," he dragged my name up from his chest before he bit down into my shoulder. "Come for me."

Other men had tried to claim me, and I had laughed at them because I knew, in the end, that they were not stronger than me. And yes, most of them had been stronger physically, but no one could hold against my sneering contempt, my barbed tongue, and my scathing commentary. I was icy and mean and unfeeling, and they had slunk away with their tails between their legs, cowed and broken. I had never been anything but cold and indifferent, never giving my heart.

And then there was Rand.

Rand Holloway had always stood against the onslaught of my vindictive nature and given back everything I had dished out. And once I

had found out he loved me, and even more amazing, that I loved him back, all that fierce, proud venom had alchemized into devouring heat. So for him, only for him, when he demanded my surrender, my submission, I gave it because I could deny the man nothing.

His name came from my throat in a gasp of breath as the orgasm crashed through me, all my muscles tightening at once, my climax triggering Rand's. His body gave out, and he collapsed on top of me, driving me down onto the bed. My laughter could not be stifled.

"Ass," he grumbled, unable to move, not wanting to move, content to ride out the aftershocks buried to the hilt inside me.

"Say it now," I demanded.

His lips were on my ear. "I love you so fucking much, Stef. You belong to me."

And even though I knew it, hearing it meant a lot. Who knew I would be just as addicted to the man's words as his actions?

 $R_{\rm AND}$ and I had come downstairs after we cleaned up enough to be presentable, and his cousin Brent was dumbfounded. It was me looking debauched with swollen lips and hooded eyes and Rand sated and sweet, yawning with a smile that curled his mouth, that did it.

"I had no idea he could even look like that," Brent told me, tipping his head at Rand as he listened to something Emily was saying.

"Like what?"

"Not mean."

But even when Rand and I had been enemies, I had never thought he was mean. I had always seen the man clearly, even when I was confused about everything else.

When the phone in the hall rang, I got up from the table where we were having dessert, the four of us plus Rand's Uncle Tyler, and excused myself to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Hello, may I speak to Rand Holloway please?"

"I'm sorry, he's busy right now. Can I take a message for him?"

"Oh yes, please, would you let him know that Katie Beal from the Truscott Rodeo called and that I called to confirm the participation of the Red Diamond at the rodeo on Friday."

I had no idea what she was talking about. "Rodeo?"

"Yes. And I know we normally don't call, everyone just shows up, but this is the fifth year, and, as Mr. Holloway knows, every five years the entire community of ranches that owns grazing land in King has to be represented, or by the stipulation put into the original deed, the party that does not attend forfeits their land ownership and their portion reverts to the other parties."

I instantly understood exactly what was going on. "The grazing lands, you're saying that if Rand doesn't show up this weekend to take part in a rodeo, then his grazing lands are forfeit, and what, redistributed?"

"Yes, it's parceled out equally, unless there is another owner in the same family."

It was all becoming clear. "So because Rand's uncle owns land in King as well, the rights that Rand has would revert to his uncle."

"To...," she was reading, "Rayland Holloway, yes, that's correct."

Everything fell into place, and I really had to give it to Glenn. Not only had he turned in an amazing performance, but he was probably on his way from our ranch to the rodeo even as I stood there speaking to the nice lady on the phone.

"And we received a tip from that same Mr. Rayland Holloway that the Red Diamond would not be participating this year due to a family emergency at another ranch, but I wasn't sure if Mr. Holloway, Mr. Rand Holloway that is, understood that this was the fifth year. He didn't attend last year, and I understand that his participation was missed, but it didn't affect his land rights."

So now I knew that Rand's cousin Glenn and his father had been scheming to make sure that Rand did not show up. I wondered if Zach knew what was going on, and if he did, I hoped he could live with himself for cheating Rand out of his birthright and for preying on his sense of honor. Because I knew that even if Rand were to find out what was going on, that he would not change his plans. He would give up the grazing rights,

relinquish his claim to the land, because he had given Zach his solemn word that he was coming to help him. For Rand Holloway, his word was his bond.

"Actually, Katie, my name is Stefan Joss, and I'm the co-owner of the Red Diamond, and I will be there representing our ranch."

"Oh." She sounded excited. "That's wonderful news—Joss is it?"

"Yes, ma'am," I told her. "Can you tell me what day I have to check in?"

"Well it's you and your men, Mr. Joss, and it's Friday morning at nine. I mean it's just a small local rodeo, but the community counts on the revenue from the tourists."

"Of course."

"You'll need to give us all the names of everyone who will be participating on behalf of the Red Diamond in the individual events, and when you get here, there will be a camp site for your men and a small stable and a corral for your horses."

What in the world had I gotten myself into just because I didn't want Glenn Holloway to win? It seemed suddenly very stupid. I needed help.

"Shall I email you all the information?"

"That would be great," I said, trying not to sound like I wanted to throw up.

"Would you like it sent to the email for Rand Holloway that we have on file?"

"No, let me give you a new one."

We talked awhile longer, and she told me about the different events, about the trailers we would be staying in, about the dances, the bachelor auction, and the awards ceremony. I got overwhelmed just listening to her.

"I can't wait to meet you. Everyone says that having the Red Diamond attend is one of the high points. You have the only ranch that isn't located in our county, Mr. Joss."

"Yeah, I know."

"Rayland and his son Glenn will be so surprised."

"Oh, I have no doubt."

Chapter 4

The academy owed me an award. The only time I wasn't acting in the following twenty-four hours was when I was in bed with Rand. There, with him, I was stripped naked both literally and emotionally, and all I could do was come apart under him. But from the time I got back to the table, before we hit the sheets, and then afterward, I was on stage. When I kissed Rand goodbye Thursday morning, waving from the porch at him and Brent and Emily—they had signed up to be guests at Zach's ranch—telling them all to be safe, smiling like an idiot until I couldn't see the car anymore, I felt like there should have been applause. It had been a truly amazing performance.

A half an hour after Rand left, Mac Chapman, Rand's foreman and the one guy on the ranch who had never warmed to me, stepped onto the porch.

"What?" he asked irritably.

I had called his cell phone, and he had ridden in from where he had been supervising some fence mending, to speak to me.

"I need help," I said from where I was sitting on the rail.

He sneered at me, and I was suddenly just done. I could hire some men when I got there. Fuck it.

"Forget it." I shook my head, starting for the door. "Sorry to bother vou."

He caught my arm, fingers tight around my bicep as he stopped me. "What is it?"

"Nothing, lemme go."

"Just tell me."

"You're a dick."

"That ain't news." He squinted at me. "Now what is it?"

"Rand's gonna lose the grazing rights in King if we don't show up at a rodeo."

"I'm sorry, what?"

I eased free of his grip and explained what was going on. He followed me into the house, and I passed him everything Katie Beal had sent me the previous evening, all the paperwork I had printed out.

"Does Rand know?" Mac asked me, his eyes flicking to mine.

"No."

He nodded. "Good. It would only eat at his gut all weekend."

"But I can go," I told him. "I own half of the Red."

"You do?"

I raised my eyebrows at him. "Yeah, asshole, I do, so maybe you should think about not being a total douche to me all the time."

The squint was back, and for the first time ever, I laughed at him.

I was stunned a second later when I got a very slight curl of his lip. I had no idea that Mac Chapman could smile. I had never seen him do it before. The man had never warmed up to me. I had initially thought it was because I was gay, but it turned out that he thought I was going to leave Rand. He thought I would get bored with life on the ranch and that his boss, who was now happy and content and smiling, would go back to how he was before I took up residence in his home. No one wanted Rand breathing fire, impossible to please, and micromanaging them. They liked him how he was now. Mac, more than anyone, liked his boss as far away from him on a daily basis as possible. He liked that I wanted to help, and for the first time since I'd met the man, he talked to me like I wasn't absolutely stupid. It was a nice change.

"There are seven events at the rodeo. I'm sending six men with you and eight horses, two extra just in case you need them. You should take that fool dog of yours, too, as well as that mare Rand gave you since she's the only horse you know how to ride. I expect my stock returned in the same condition they left in. You hear me?"

"Yessir." I nodded, turning to leave.

"We're all gonna have hell to pay when he finds out about this, Stef."

"I know." I nodded. "Give me a better plan."

He just looked at my face.

"See?"

Two hours later—why we were leaving so early I had no idea—I was driving a huge pickup truck with double wheels off the ranch with Everett sitting beside me in the cab, and Dusty stretched out behind me with Bella laying on the seat next to him. Pierce, Tom, Chase, and Chris were in the pickup behind me.

"You look stupid."

I turned my head to look at Everett. "Pardon me?"

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone who looked less like he should be wearing a cowboy hat and boots than you."

The worn brown cowboy hat I had on my head had been a gift from Rand as had the boots that were on my feet. While I wasn't entirely comfortable, fitting in was key. I did not want anyone to second-guess my right to be there.

"So what was your plan for this thing if Mac hadn't talked us all into it?"

"I dunno," I sighed. "I was thinking of calling Mitch Powell and seeing who he could maybe pay to go with me, and then I would have to pay him back."

My hat was pulled off fast, I got a quick slap across the top of my head, and then the hat was shoved back down hard. It took only seconds, but it stung like mad.

"Shit, Dusty," I groused at him, lifting my right hand to rub where it hurt.

The motion sent my hat down over my aviator sunglasses and my eyes. But Everett was there to slap my hand away and knock the hat back.

"Try an' keep your eyes on the damn road, all right?"

"I would if people weren't hit—"

"You never go off the ranch for help," Dusty scolded me. "Never."

"Never," Everett echoed him. "We take care of our own."

"But I'm not one of you guys," I told them. "You all respect and care for Rand, not me."

"You don't give yourself no credit," Dusty assured me. "Without you knowing about finances and such, Rand would not be making all the money he is."

"That's not true," I assured them. "Rand is a very smart business—"

"And if Rand didn't wanna make a home for you, then he wouldn't be fixin' to make all the changes in Hillman."

That part was probably true.

"Before you was here," Dusty chimed in, "Rand Holloway was a prick."

I wasn't touching that one with a ten foot pole.

"Well said," Everett cackled.

"But since you been on the ranch, I can stand to talk to him for more than five minutes."

Everett was laughing.

I smiled, seating the hat on my head as Dusty yelled at Bella to quit moving. We all laughed as she muscled him out of the way, all seventy pounds of dog taking up position so she, instead of Dusty, was behind me. She put her head on the back of my seat to the left, and I felt her warm breath whuffling on my cheek before her tongue got my ear.

"Bell," I griped, wiping it off, reaching back to scratch under her chin.

"She's worried I'm gonna hit ya ag'in." Dusty chuckled. "I ain't never seen a dog more protective. It's sweet."

As she nuzzled the side of my neck, I had to agree.

We stopped for lunch and then again for dinner, and after we fed and watered the horses, took them out, walked them a bit, and then got them back in the trailers, we were back on our way. We reached Truscott just after midnight, and I was thrilled to see the area awash with lights. I left Chase in charge, and took Dusty and Everett with me to register.

The trailer for participants was clearly marked, and when we reached the front of the line, I gave the man sitting at the table the name of the ranch.

"Red Diamond," I said.

There were three people there, two women and the one man, and his head snapped up to look at me.

"We were told that the Red Diamond was not participating this year."

"Then you were misinformed, sir," I told him.

"Well, I'm so pleased." He smiled and fished through a stack of manila envelopes in front of him. "Oh, I see it here now. You spoke to Katie."

"Yessir."

"Are you...." He squinted at the printout he had pulled from the envelope. "Steven Joss?"

"It's Stefan, but yes."

"Wonderful." He smiled up at me and seemed genuinely pleased. "We were worried that the Red Diamond was going to give us a miss this year just like the two years prior."

"And we're sorry about that," Everett chimed in. "And I assure you, sir, that we will never miss another."

The man extended his hand to me. "I'm Hud Lawrence, and may I say that this is just about the best piece of news I've had all week," he told me as we shook. He grasped Everett's hand after mine and then Dusty's. "Lots of folks come out just to see you all. This rodeo is mostly a small community one 'cept for you folks, and it's a treat to see your stock. I've got to give Gil Landry a call and tell him that you all showed up. I know he was lookin' forward to competing if you were fixin' to be here."

I nodded, accepted the registration packet from Hud, wrote the man a check for seven hundred dollars, a hundred per event, and stepped back so Everett could give him the names of who was participating and in what. Dusty chatted with the two women at the table, had them laughing with him in minutes, so charming with his big blue eyes and dimples, and was getting the gossip as Hud typed information into his laptop. Once everything was signed—release of liability forms, insurance forms—our numbers given to us, and directions to our trailer, stable and corral to work our horses, we thanked him and the two women and headed back to the others.

"Who is Gil whoever?" I asked Everett.

"He's a rancher here," he answered, irritable suddenly. "He and Rand have a kind of—I dunno, strange sort of rivalry goin' on. I don't really get it. They're friends, but they ain't. I'm not sure how to describe it."

"He hates Rand," Dusty told me. "That's how you describe it."

"But not all the time. He only hates Rand sometimes."

"Well, I'm sure he's gonna be disappointed that Rand's not here."

"Most likely," Everett agreed, but the look on his face was odd.

Everett Hartline was a strange man. He was absolutely dangerous and unpredictable, and his temper was horrible. He was also extremely loyal and very protective of his home, which was Rand's ranch. I liked it best when he wasn't armed. When he and Chris took their rifles at night to check on the borders of the ranch, I got nervous.

"Something you're not telling me?"

He shook his shaggy head, the light brown hair, streaked gold from the sun, falling into his dark blue eyes. No one would ever say that Everett was handsome, but once you saw his face, you never forgot it. He reminded me of the pictures of the cowboys from the Old West—rugged, hard, and tanned from living their lives outdoors. There was no trace of gentleness in the man, no softness, just mean edges that I never wanted to be on the wrong side of. He scared me just a little.

"So do you guys all know what events you're gonna do?" I asked him. He smiled barely. "It's nice to hear you ask. Rand don't ever ask."

"'Cause he knows what all your strengths are," I sighed deeply, passing him the packet with all the numbers in it. "I'm just along for the ride."

"You're more than that," he said as we reached the others.

As they all started deciding who was going to do what, I yelled over that I was going to bed. No one heard me, but it didn't matter.

There were two trailers, and they each slept four so there was more than enough room. Once I was changed and under the covers, taking the bunk at the back, I took pity on the dog looking up at me like she was dying.

"Get in the bed," I told her.

She was up and tucked down on the other side of me, head on my hip with a happy whimper, seconds later. I didn't hear the others come in.

Chapter 5

 B_{REAKFAST} was amazing, all the good home cooking, and when Everett and I were on our way to watch the grand entry, where all the contestants entered the arena for the rodeo, a man stepped in front of us. He was immediately joined by three others. It was slightly intimidating, but the fact that he looked so familiar somehow kept it from being frightening. He had the same thick jet-black hair that all the Holloway men had, though his was dusted gray at his temple.

"You look like a Holloway," I told him.

"You know I am."

"Are you Rayland Holloway?"

He squinted at me. "Yessir. And you're Stefan Joss, my son tells me."

"Yeah. Where is old Glenn? I'd love to talk to him."

He grunted and the men behind him moved in closer. Everett bumped me with his shoulder when he stepped in beside me.

"What brings you to the rodeo, Mr. Joss?"

"It's the five-year mark for the grazing lands, sir," I answered him.

His eyes narrowed.

"And as I own half of the Red Diamond, I had to be here to make sure we didn't lose our grazing rights."

It was fun because he looked like I'd hit him.

"So even though Rand's out at the Sarasota with your son Zach," Everett drawled out, laying it on thick, "the Red Diamond is here in the official capacity to compete and therefore, retain the grazing rights in King."

Rayland stood there, absolutely white-faced, mouth open like a fish, somehow looking slightly smaller than he had two minutes ago.

"'Cause as you know, there are no stipulations that anyone has to win or even place; just participation is required from all the ranches that graze their cattle on the land."

The hatred in his eyes was hard to face, but I had seen worse in my life, so it was par for the course.

I had to physically restrain Everett when the man took a step back and spat at my feet.

"Watch your back," he warned before he turned on his heel, shoved his way through his own men, and stalked away.

"Well," I said the second we were alone, "that went well."

"That man just threatened you," Everett barked at me, indignant and angry.

"Yeah, and it was crazy, over the top, very *Walking Tall* wasn't it?" I chuckled. "I mean come on, 'watch your back'? Who says that? It's like a badly edited B-movie."

He was looking at me like I was nuts.

"What?"

"I don't get you at all."

I shrugged, turning to walk toward the arena. "I wanna talk to him."

"Talk to who?" Everett said as he caught up to me.

"Mr. Holloway."

"You wanna talk to the man who just spit on you?"

"At me, not on me," I corrected. "And yeah."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. There's gotta be a way to fix all this."

"All what?"

"All this bad blood," I told him. "It's such a shame to have a family ripped apart."

"But as far as I can tell, it's been like this since Rand's father died, and that man back there wanted the ranch, and my boss said no."

I nodded because there was no way it was as easy as he was making it out to be.

"You're thinking that there's more to it."

"Yes." I smiled at him. "And that was very perceptive of you."

He rolled his eyes. "Sometimes it's just jealousy, Stef," he said before tugging on my arm. "C'mon, I gotta get to the arena, and you need a seat."

He left me at the corral, bolting toward Chris, who was yelling at him to hurry the hell up, and I joined the crowd, blending in with everyone else in my jeans, boots, and hat. Reaching the main area, I climbed up through the crowd on the bleachers up toward the top until I found some space. The view was good, and I was surprised at the number of people who were there.

"So you own the Red Diamond?"

I turned and there was a man looking up at me from under the brim of his black Stetson. "I own half of the Red Diamond," I corrected him.

He nodded. "We heard you were here last night."

So this guy had to be Gil Landry that Hud Lawrence had told me he was going to call. But to be sure, I asked. "And you are?"

"Gil Landry," he said, leaning forward, offering me his hand.

The man was even bigger than Rand. My cowboy was leaner, his muscles sleeker. Gil was bulkier, everything fitting tight from the shirt stretched across his wide chest and bulging biceps, to the denim encasing lean hips and long, thick legs. When my eyes met his, he smiled, which warmed the dark brown eyes and softened his face. Handsome man, not breathtaking like Rand Holloway, but few men were.

I took the offered hand, squeezed tight, and then let go. "Stefan Joss. Good to meet you."

"We were expecting Rand."

"He's helping his cousin with an emergency."

"I see." He nodded, indicating the woman seated beside him. "This is my sister Carly."

I leaned forward and took the hand she offered me. "Pleasure to meet you."

"And you." She nodded, tipping her head. "Though I have to tell you that I wish Rand had come with you. Seeing that man is one of the highlights of the rodeo for me."

I bet it was. "Well, I suspect he'll be here next year."

She tried to force a smile, but I realized how really sad she looked. "It's doubtful. Between his ranch and his new wife, we—"

"Wife?"

"Yes," she snapped irritably.

"Rand Holloway is—"

"I'm sorry." She softened her tone. "You own half the ranch, so I'm sure you must have met her. Stephanie, isn't it?"

I shook my head. "Rand Holloway is not married."

"How is it you own half the ranch, Stefan?"

"Because like I said, Rand Holloway is not married, and it's not Stephanie, it's Stefan," I said, rising, getting ready to find another place to sit.

"Wait." Gil stopped me, and my eyes were back on his brown ones.

I stood my ground.

He cleared his throat. "We're sorry, Mr.—Stefan. We had no idea that Rand Holloway was...." He turned and looked at his sister. "Did we?"

Her mouth was open, her eyes were huge, and she could not seem to stop staring at my face.

"So." Gil coughed, looking back up at me. "Have a seat here, and let me explain this all to you. We heard you moved here from Chicago. You probably don't have a lot of experience with this kind of thing, do you?"

I studied him, then his sister, and then went back to him. "I'm not up to bullshit today."

"You speak your mind."

"I have to deal with Rand's cousin Glenn at some point today, and his father, Rayland, just threatened me, so if you want to mess with me, so not in the mood, you know?"

He nodded. "Rayland Holloway is a dick."

"And Glenn's a pig," Carly seconded, finally finding her voice.

I sat down.

The rodeo was bigger than I thought it would be, but I had it on good authority, from Gil, that compared to some it was tiny. We had missed everyone riding in and circling while we were talking. All the competitors were already in a row at the center of the arena, and I saw Rand's men waving to the crowd.

"It's good that you came, Stefan," Carly assured me, reaching over her brother to pat my knee. "We get a much bigger crowd when the Red is here, and that helps the community so much. Thank you."

"You're very welcome."

I sat there with her and her brother and got an education on rodeo events during the course of the morning and afternoon. Watching the calf roping, or tie-down roping, was interesting, and Rand's stoic ranch hand Chris was the fastest and moved like a machine. The crowd certainly appreciated his technique and economy of movement, and when his time came in as the best, I was thrilled for him.

The team roping was next, or what Carly called heading and heeling.

"See, Stef, your man Chase just roped the steer's horns. He's the header, and now Everett, he's the heeler, he's going to lasso the back legs, and together they're going to put it in the dirt."

"Seems mean," I told her.

I got a few looks from some people around us, and Carly just shook her head.

"What?"

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

I smiled at her.

The lunch break pulled everyone from the bleachers to the different concession stands, and when I tried to leave them, Gil reached for me, put a hand on my shoulder, manhandling me like Rand always did, and steered me toward the food area. The three of us stood in line to get Indian fry bread with cheese and beans, and afterward decided to walk around.

Not only was it a rodeo, but a fair as well, with all the cotton candy and rides and the booths where you could win those huge stuffed animals that were only cool when you were walking on the midway. At home it was just crap that cluttered up your house.

"You know, that hat looks strange on you," Gil commented as we stopped so Carly could buy some gifts for her nieces.

"I get that a lot," I chuckled, remembering Everett dissing the same hat in the truck with me.

"I bet." He nodded, reaching out to touch the brim. "You don't really fit in here, do you?"

"I fit at the Red," I told him because somehow, I got the strange feeling that he was trying, in a sort of backhanded way, to make a point. "I fit with Rand."

"Do you?"

His tone was icy, and I noticed that he was barely breathing. I looked past him at Carly and found her gazing at me as well. The second my eyes met hers, she smiled big and turned away.

"I would say that you want to fit with him, and so you think you do, but you don't."

My eyes returned to his.

"You're wrong."

"How can I be? I just spent the day talkin' to you, and you don't know shit about being a cowboy or life on a ranch. You don't know anything about what Rand really needs."

"And you do?"

"I do."

"And what is that?"

"The man needs the same thing I do, someone who can stand at his side, not someone he has to take care of."

I turned to go, but he grabbed my arm hard, wrenching me back around as he leaned in close to me, finger in my face. "You might have turned Rand's head with this—whatever the fuck this is, but when he comes to his senses, he'll want a woman who can love him and love his ranch and give him sons."

Sometimes I missed what was right in front of me. "Carly."

"That's right," he snarled quietly at me, digging his fingers into my bicep. He would leave bruises. "I've been pushin' him for forever to date her so he can see how good his life can be. It nearly broke her heart when we heard he had remarried. I didn't think I'd ever see her back to smiling, but then today when you showed up... hell. She's pleased as punch."

And I knew why she was happy. "She thinks it won't last."

"She knows, just like I do, that this is nothing. He will toss you out of his home in no time and finally look at what's been waitin' patiently for him this whole time. Carly will make Rand the best wife ever. If you were smart, you'd clear out before he throws you out."

"Get your hand off me."

It happened so fast. He let go of my arm, shoved me back, and hit me. I didn't realize until his fist was connecting with my jaw that he was that angry. Normally, I could defend myself better. I had been in enough fights in my life, but it was so unexpected. I didn't even have time to react before I was on the ground.

"What the fuck?"

I looked up, and Glenn Holloway was there beside me.

"Stay out of this, Glenn."

"Nice sucker punch," he said, offering me a hand without looking at me, keeping an eye on Gil. "Back the fuck off."

"Or what?"

"You really wanna do this?" Glenn asked him as he pulled me to my feet. "Or do you just wanna walk away?"

The two men stood there like rams ready to lock horns, and then Gil turned and left without a backward glance. All the Holloway men had crappy tempers apparently.

"Thanks," I said, touching my face, making sure my right eye was still in my head. "Shit, that hurts."

"Well, I expect so," he said matter-of-factly, picking my hat up from where it had fallen in the dirt. He didn't give it back to me, just held it. "Come on." He grabbed my arm.

I rolled my shoulder so he had to let me go. "Just—I'm done with being manhandled for one day, all right?"

"Sure," he agreed, pointing down the row of concession stands. "Walk that way."

I didn't realize that the White Ash had a food booth where they made steak plates. I was directed behind the counter, and since he couldn't hold himself back anymore, he had to manhandle me. He shoved me down into a chair and then walked away. I watched the flurry of activity going on around me. There was an enormous grill, and the man there was brushing steaks with sauce, checking the charcoal as well as the flame, and frying mushrooms over the open flame on the opposite side. Another man was slicing the cooked steaks into bite-sized pieces and dropping them into huge metal bowls. The next man in the production line was frying onions, sweet potato wedges, and russet potato wedges. At the final station, salad was being tossed and coleslaw mixed.

"God, it smells amazing in here," I told Glenn when he stepped back in front of me.

"Uh-huh," he grunted before he slapped a steak over my eye.

"Owww, shit!" I yelled. He had not been gentle at all.

"Sorry."

He wasn't sorry one little bit.

"Lemme see," he said, hand on my chin, tipping my head back to look at my nose. "What did you say to make him take a poke at you?"

"He wants his sister Carly to marry Rand."

"Still?" an incredulous voice asked.

I chuckled as a woman stepped in beside Glenn. She held out some Tylenol for me.

"That woman's been wanting Rand Holloway for years. I suspect if she was going to get him, it would've happened already."

"Thank you." I smiled, taking the pills and the water. "I'm Stefan Joss."

"I know who you are." She nodded. "And I'm Gina, Gina Showalter. I work for Mr. Holloway here."

"Pleasure to meet you," I said, shaking her hand after I took the Tylenol, and passing her back the empty water glass.

"Feel better," she said, patting Glenn's shoulder before she left to return to taking food orders at the front.

"What does Gina do on your ranch?"

"She cooks and cleans, keeps my father and me from starving," he said, gesturing for me to replace the steak on my eye. "And she's right. Carly's been holdin' out for Rand for as long as I can remember."

"Oh, yeah? Did she and Rand ever get together?"

"Nope, 'cause Rand only screws girls at the rodeo who don't wanna keep him."

"Nothing serious."

"That's right."

"And Carly is not the kind of girl you fuck at the rodeo."

"No, sir. She's the kind you court at the rodeo, follow home, and marry."

"So Rand passed on Carly."

"Yep. All Rand wanted to do when he got here was drink and screw and ride the bull."

"Rand's a bull rider?"

"He does some saddle bronc as well, but yeah, Rand's the guy who normally rides the bull for the Red Diamond."

I could only imagine how hot the man looked doing that.

"Poor Carly, I used to watch her fawning all over him only to have him leave with some other woman, most times more than one a night."

"So Rand was a dog."

"He was more than that."

"And she still wants him."

"You always want what you can't have."

"I'm surprised Gil would want a man who treated his sister so badly to marry her."

"I think Gil's more interested in the Red Diamond than Rand."

"Gil could maybe use a loan?"

"I suspect so."

"Carly says you're a pig."

"She should know. At last year's rodeo, when Rand didn't show, she set her sights on me."

"And?"

"And nothin'. Do I look like I'm about to be a stand-in for Rand Holloway?"

"No."

"That's right. I ain't no consolation prize. I'm smarter than that."

"Oh, you're very smart." I smiled at him. "The way you made sure that Rand went to the Sarasota for the weekend, very nicely played."

But he didn't look happy or smug. "You won't believe me, so I ain't sayin' nothin'."

"Go ahead and say. I might even believe you."

He squinted at me. "I forgot the damn rodeo was this weekend. When I called my father to tell him I was on my way back and I wasn't goin' to Zach's since Rand was, he reminded me about this."

"But you didn't call Rand."

"Fuck no, not after that whole mess."

I nodded.

"How did you find out about the rodeo?"

"A very nice lady called me. I think I need to send her a card or something."

He crossed his arms as he looked at me. "None of us knew that Rand put you on the goddamn deed for his ranch."

"Why would you?"

"Seems like a lot to give."

"Aren't you going to give your wife half when you get married?"

"For one, I ain't never gettin' married, and for two, you ain't the man's wife."

"No, I'm not, but I'm as close as he's ever gonna get."

He grunted.

"You doubt me?"

"I don't think anything about it. All I do know is it seems that Carly's shit outta luck. Again." He cackled.

The man had a lot of wicked in him, and for better or worse, I was warming up to him.

"Yeah." I smiled wide, lifting the steak off my eye and offering it to him. "May I trade this one in for a cooked one, please?"

"God, you're a pain in the ass."

"Can I have mushrooms too?"

He made me leave the raw meat on my eye, but he brought me back a plate with steak and mushrooms and fries smothered in cheese and ranch dressing and bacon bits. I had coleslaw on the side.

"Thank you," I said sincerely as I sat up, unconcerned about my eye.

"Lemme see." He stilled me, checking it as I started shoveling food into my mouth.

The food was so good. "You guys should have a restaurant," I told him.

"Could you maybe chew and not talk with your mouth full so I can understand what the hell you just said?"

I swallowed hard and looked up at him. "You should have a restaurant. This is amazing."

He nodded and left me again, only to return seconds later with a huge cup of Pepsi and a Ziploc bag of ice.

"Why're you being so nice?"

"'Cause, you damn fool, you just got hit in the face."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"You should really sell this in a building where people can come all the time," I told him. "A restaurant would be a good investment."

"Oh yeah? Tell my father."

"He doesn't think so?"

"He thinks it's different at the rodeo and other events we sponsor because it's special, since folks can't get it all the time. He thinks if we had a restaurant that the appeal would be short-lived, and we'd lose a ton of money."

"Oh, I disagree," I told him. "If you ever wanna try, call me, and I can put together a marketing plan for you and crunch numbers. I bet it would be easy to get investors. You wouldn't even need your dad."

He got very still, wary.

"Glenn?"

"Are you fuckin' with me?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I just got through fuckin' with Rand."

"Yeah, but that's your bullshit with him. This is different. This could be your life."

He was looking at me so intently.

"I could help you if you let me."

His eyes, which were really the most magnificent shade of peacock blue, did not leave mine. It was like he was checking for something.

"Glenn?"

"Eat your food."

After I finished everything, I let my head loll back, put the bag of ice on my eye, closed both, and relaxed. I didn't realize I had drifted off until I heard someone yell. When I opened my eyes, I found that my hat had fallen forward over my eyes and that the Ziploc bag of ice was gone. Tipping the brown straw hat back, I saw a woman holding on to Glenn's arm, her long red fingernails digging into his skin.

"Glenn Holloway, the bachelor auction begins right at six, so you best get all cleaned up and in your Sunday best before I call for you."

He looked like an animal caught in a trap.

I snorted out a laugh.

"Megan, I—"

"Oh, no." The cute bottle-blonde cut him off. "You swore to me and so did your daddy. I expect you to be there."

He looked very uncomfortable. Her eyes then slid over to me.

"And you are?"

"Stefan Joss," I said, standing up, massaging the back of my neck where it ached a little.

Her eyes were the colors of cornflowers. "From where?"

"The Red Diamond."

She tipped her head, narrowing the blue to mere slits. "Rand Holloway, did he come?"

Of course she knew who Rand was. "No, ma'am."

"You look married to me, Mr. Joss. Are you married?"

"I live with somebody, uhm?"

She thrust her hand at me. "Megan Reed."

"Pleasure." I smiled, taking her hand.

"I need someone to help with the bachelor auction, Mr. Joss."

"I've been to at least ten in my life."

Her face lit up as she clutched my hand. "Are you serious?"

"They do well as charity fundraisers as long as the guys are hot."

"Cowboys in Wranglers," she said like I was nuts. "What could be hotter?"

So help me God, I didn't say anything.

"Will you be my assistant?"

"Oh, honey, I would love to."

Her catch of breath made me smile.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Glenn growled beside me.

Finally I was back in my element; charity events were something I knew how to do.

"Come with me," she said, taking my hand, tugging. "Oh my God, I'm so excited!" Her squeal of happiness was loud.

"You best watch yourself, Stefan Joss!" Glenn called after me. "Don't do nothin' stupid!"

I flipped him off as I walked away.

"Fuck!" I heard him croak back.

Everett was fit to be tied. Chase was spitting nails. Tom called me names, and Pierce growled. Not one of them wanted anything to do with a bachelor auction. They would absolutely never... ever... in a million... and then we reached the stage area, and they saw all the women. An ocean of women, hundreds of them were there just waiting for a chance to have a cowboy, if only for one night, one dream-date. Suddenly I was brilliant, absolutely and without doubt fucking brilliant, and being bid on like a piece of meat was flattering instead of something sleazy.

I had not pressed Chris to participate because I had realized a year ago that he wasn't conceited or angry. He was shy. So when he leaned quietly next to me and said that he wouldn't mind being in the auction, I smiled wide.

"Holy shit." Megan was stunned when she turned and found me there in front of her.

I gave her a slow grin, watching her mouth fall open, her eyes go round.

"You... Stefan...."

The thing was, I cleaned up nice. I had ditched the whole cowboy vibe because it didn't matter anymore if I fit in or not. By the reaction of most people, I wasn't going to anyway. What did matter was that I had brought my men to the rodeo, and we had swept the events thus far.

Calf roping, team roping, barrel racing, and steer wrestling were behind us, and the next day we were facing saddle bronc, bareback bronc riding, and bull riding. Apparently by the number of people who had come up to congratulate me on the performance my men turned in, we were a shoo-in to sweep every category. I was trying not to smile like an idiot and strut around the place.

"I think I should auction you off, Stefan." Her breath fluttered. "I think I could make a lot of money."

My jeans were too tight, my hair was gelled to artistic perfection, and the bracelets I wore were back. The oversized watch with the thick biker band, all the details that had been hidden away so I could pass for serious rancher, were returned. The dress shirt clung to me, open lower than just the collar and unbuttoned at the bottom to show skin and how low the denim was riding on my hips. Anyone who was looking could not miss my display of sleek gold skin. I had been hiding, and now I wanted everyone to see me.

"Can I have the microphone?" I asked her.

She passed it to me, and I wandered out on stage as soon as the band wrapped up their song. I held out a hand for the lead singer, and he moved his guitar around to his back, held there by the strap, and took my hand in both of his. The only way I could tell they were a country band were the hats. Other than that, jeans, T-shirts, boots, they could have been a grunge band or alternative. But I had met them earlier, and they had been very happy to meet me. A master of ceremonies always kept things moving and on track, and they appreciated that.

"Let's hear it for Bootlegger, everybody," I called out, "and show them how much we appreciate them coming out tonight to entertain us!"

Thunderous applause as all eyes came to rest on me.

"I'm Stefan Joss from The Red Diamond, and I want to welcome you all to the Truscott Rodeo bachelor auction and dance."

Whistling, more applause, and catcalls greeted my introduction, and then I asked the ladies if they were ready to get them a cowboy.

The screaming started immediately, and my smile went neon. I was there to auction off hot men in skin-tight denim, worn boots, and Stetsons. Oh, I was so very popular.

I had twenty men to find homes for, and I did it four at a time, with the band playing three songs between each. I made a big deal out of every cowboy, giving kudos to Rand's men without running down anybody else. When Chris went up, and he was bid on fast and furious, the shy smile he gave me was very sweet. We had people line dancing on stage with me, women planting kisses on the band, and the event sponsors who visited the side of the stage when we were taking a break wanted to shake my hand. Megan nearly smothered me to death and told me over and over that already we had tripled the money from the year before and we still had men left to auction off. Hud Lawrence came by personally to thank me.

When I retook the stage after our intermission, the applause was deafening. The band launched into an improvised rendition of Queen's "Somebody To Love," and the place went nuts. I was laughing hard, Megan was bawling and clapping her hands, and the band was really into it. We got

the lighters in the air, and everybody was singing along. When the song finally finished after what felt like a good hour, the applause went on and on and on.

Glenn took the stage after that, and I begged the women in the crowd to please take the man home and love him hard. It was crude and hot and even the man's scathing look could not stifle me. I was on an adrenaline high.

He pointed at me like he was going to beat the crap out of me. I waved.

The bids came loud and lewd, and the look on Glenn's face made me double over with laughter. Rand's cousin went for a thousand dollars, which made him the most expensive bachelor of the night. As I awarded him to Miss Rachel Webber from the Triple Star ranch, he shot me a look, which I couldn't read. I wasn't sure if it was surprise, anger, or fear, so I went with thinking he was flattered, put him out of my mind, and sang along with the band as they covered "Life Is A Highway" so the crowd could sing at the top of their lungs again.

All my bachelors were swept up, and when it was done, the band asked me what I wanted to hear. At which point, I caught sight of Glenn's father and had them sing some vintage ELO for me. "Don't Bring Me Down" came out as a driving rendition that was so loud, between the band and the crowd, that no one even noticed I was singing along in the microphone.

I hung up my master of ceremonies duties after that, and the appreciation was overwhelming. Megan hugged me so hard, and told me again that she thought I would be worth more than Glenn Holloway. I dragged her down into the crowd, and when I waved up at Blake, he launched into "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" just to round out the set of oldies but goodies. Megan enjoyed dancing with me, and we moved well together. When another man came and cut in, I moved away even though she tried to hold on to me. But he was cute and I wasn't available, so I gave her a waggle of eyebrow, and she let me go.

I went to the side of the stage and reached a hand up for Blake to shake. I got back a card with their contact information and a number scrawled on the back. When my eyes met his, he mouthed the words *cell*

number and *call me*, and I put it in the back pocket of my jeans much to his very apparent delight.

Darting to the edge of the dancing area, I started back toward the trailer.

"Stefan!"

I looked over my shoulder and saw Glenn Holloway. I didn't stop walking.

"Will you fuckin' wait!"

But I kept my runway stride going, making him work to catch up. "Why aren't you dancing with Rachel Webber?"

"What?" He was indignant.

"The very pretty girl who could not keep her hands off of you."

"I—"

"The one who bought you," I teased him.

"That date ain't for tonight. I've got bull ridin' to do tomorrow."

He sounded so indignant. "I see. Well, you should still be dancing with her anyway."

"Why ain't you dancin' with the singer?"

I stopped suddenly, and he took two steps by before he rounded on me. "I'm sorry?"

"I saw how he was lookin' at you."

Why in the world was he trying to interpret any kind of look that he saw pass between me and the lead singer? "And how was that?"

"Like he was interested."

Why did he care?

"Rand ain't here. No one would know."

"I would know," I told him, crossing my arms. "And the lead singer isn't gay."

"He's not?"

"No, sir, he's not."

"Then what was with the card?"

"I think maybe he wants me to call him if I ever have need for a band."

He looked very disgruntled, and I had to smile at him.

"I can't believe you acted like that tonight. Rand would die of embarrassment."

"Embarrassed of what precisely?"

"Are you kidding? You made a total spectacle of yourself all night, made people think the Red Diamond is a joke, and dragged Rand's reputation through the dirt."

"Lemme understand this," I said, pinning him there with my gaze. "We raised more money for charity this year than they did in the last five and—"

"How the hell do you know that?" he yelled at me.

"Because Hud Lawrence told me," I cracked sarcastically. "How do you think?"

He looked like he was ready to punch me.

"The Red Diamond swept all the rodeo events, and people had a great time tonight, but somehow, in your mind, in your world, Rand's reputation got damaged. Why, because I was dancing? Was I dancing too gay? Do you think everyone knows?"

"Yessir, I think everyone of 'em knows you're gay!"

"And who gives a damn?"

"You could get yourself killed."

"Because they're all coming after me."

"They could be."

"Well, here I am."

There was only silence.

I made a big show of listening.

"You're really a wiseass, you know that?"

"Where's the angry mob? Are they late?"

He closed the distance between us and shoved me back hard.

"Is that all you got?"

"I should beat the shit outta you."

"Call Gil Landry; I'm sure he'd love to help you."

His snarl of outrage let me know how really drunk he was. The man was not all that solid on his own feet.

"Jesus," I laughed, grabbing his arms, steadying him. "You are wound so fuckin' tight, man, what the hell?"

His head snapped up and his eyes met mine. I was swallowed in inky blue a minute before he swept his heavy-lidded gaze over me, from head to toe. He missed nothing.

I had to think a second and process.

Did I see what I thought I saw or not? Was Rand Holloway's homophobic cousin actually checking me out?

"Glenn," I gasped his name, watching the muscles in his jaw cord.

He yanked away from my hands, and we stood there, staring, silent.

"You," he said, his voice hoarse, gruff. "How come you're so...."

"What?" I asked when I was sure he wasn't going to finish his sentence.

He didn't answer, just took a step forward.

"Glenn?" I had to tilt my head back to hold his gaze.

"Are you gonna come watch me ride the bull?"

"Sure," I said softly.

"Do me a favor and wear real clothes tomorrow."

"Okay."

"Not jeans like this," he said, eyes trailing down my body, "and this shirt is bullshit."

"Okay."

"It's barely on," he said, his hand slowly fisting in the crushed silk.

I stood still, feeling the back of his knuckles against my chest, my skin. "Glenn."

He turned suddenly and strode away. I had no idea what was going on in his mind, but I became aware of the whimpering behind me seconds later. When I looked toward the corral, I saw her there, head between the slats, looking at me, big brown eyes wet with happiness because she was looking

at me. She was so well-trained, as was my mare Ruby. The horse was standing in the corral chilling, and the dog had been keeping vigil, neither one of them a bother in any way.

But now the dog wanted to be allowed to see me up close.

"Come here," I called Bella.

She was through the slats and bounding up to me, wiggling, whining, and dancing around my legs, in ecstasy now that I had returned. I bent to pet her, and she shoved her nose in my eye before she licked my nose and bumped my chin. And then she was suddenly rigid, hair standing up, stepping in front of me, pressed to my side.

"Stefan Joss!"

I rose as Rayland Holloway closed in on me, breathing fire, chewing brimstone. He looked more pissed off than usual.

"Is it true?"

I wanted to be mad at him, but frankly he looked too much like Rand, too much like Glenn, whom I was really warming to, and a lot like his brother, Rand and Charlotte's late father James, for me to dredge up any hate for him. And Tyler. He looked like Uncle Tyler too.

"Is what true, sir?" I called out to him as he charged toward me.

"Did you just—what the hell is wrong with your dog?"

Bella had put her head down, bared her teeth, and made a noise I had no idea she could make. It was obvious from the snarl of warning that she was ready to unleash teeth and claws.

"Just stop walking like that," I told him. "That's seventy, almost seventy-five pounds of angry, threatened dog there."

He stopped moving, and I saw something flicker across his face. Interest?

"She's a Rhodesian Ridgeback."

"A what?" he snapped at me.

I repeated the name. "You wanna see her?"

"No, I don't wanna see—"

"She's actually very sweet, but you're freaking her out with how you're moving."

"I ain't moving in no—"

"And I bet your dogs would protect you if I came at you the same way you just came at me."

He glared at me.

I pointed to the picnic table close by. He stalked over to it and sat down. After a minute, I followed him and took a seat at the other end of the bench.

We sat there in silence for several minutes, and Bella, having trailed after me, was there like my shadow, her head resting in my lap. As I sat there, my mind drifting, it occurred to me that all the time Glenn and I had been talking, Bella had watched, and not once did she growl or bark to alert me of her presence. As fiercely protective as she was, what was it about Glenn Holloway that didn't make her think he was going to hurt me?

"Dog's too big to work cattle."

The gruff comment brought me from my thoughts.

"No," I told him. "Even German Shepherds were originally bred to be herding dogs. You're just not used to seeing it."

We lapsed into another silence.

He finally lifted his hand, and I told Bella to go. She went to him and instead of sitting there and waiting, she put her head in his lap just as she had me.

His grunt before he petted her, scratched behind her ears, and rubbed under her chin made me understand that the wall was not as hard or as high as I thought.

"This can't just be about me," I started what I hoped would be a long conversation. "I just got here, only even been around for two years. There has to be more."

"I don't abide sodomites."

A word I had not heard directed at me, probably ever. Other words, lots of them, had been leveled at me at one time or another, but that one was new. "Yeah, but all this animosity because of that? I don't buy it."

"Yeah, well, believe what you want."

"So when Rand was married to Jenny, you all got along like peas and carrots?"

He turned and scowled at me.

The *Forrest Gump* reference was lost on him. "Well?"

He went back to looking out across the open range. Where our trailers were, and the stable and corral we had been assigned, was at the very edge of the grounds. Beyond us was just brush and grass and dirt and endless sky.

"So you weren't all singing 'Kumbayah' together, were you, sir?"

"I have no idea what you just said."

"Why the bad blood between you and Rand? I heard you wanted the ranch, and he said no."

Nothing, not even a nibble, but he had come to see me for some reason.

"Did you, too, come to yell at me about being master of ceremonies tonight?"

"Why? Who else yelled at you?"

"Glenn."

He grunted his approval. "Did he give you the eye?"

"No, Gil Landry did. And it's not that bad."

"Landry? Why?"

"He wants his sister to marry Rand."

"Or Glenn," he growled. "He just wants a Holloway, any one will do."

"I think Carly wants Rand."

"And maybe when he throws you out on your ass, she can have him."

"Maybe," I sighed.

He turned his brilliant eyes on me. "Don't flaunt yourself in front of people no more."

"Flaunt myself?"

"You showin' folks you're queer is gonna get you in trouble."

"When did I do that?"

"What?"

"Show people I was queer?"

"Just—wear somethin' else."

It was my choice in clothes again.

"You're dressed like a rock star."

Like the man had any idea how rock stars dressed. "I thought I looked gay."

He growled at me. "I don't want no one to hurt you is all."

"You don't give a crap if I get hurt."

"If you get hurt, then Rand—" He rubbed his forehead, having stopped himself. "There's enough. There don't need to be no more."

"So you want me to be careful because if I get hurt, Rand will blame you?"

"I'm here, ain't I?" he snapped at me. "If somethin' were to happen to you and he knows that I—just stay out of sight, all right?"

Be safe. "Why do you care? I thought you hated Rand."

"He—"

"You wanted to buy the ranch, and he told you to go to hell."

"He was too young to take on that goddamn ranch alone!" he yelled at me, which, for whatever reason, did not startle my dog. Perhaps it was because she had heard his voice crack just like I did. He sounded like he was in pain.

"You wanted to help?" I said thoughtfully.

He moved like he was going to turn toward me, but stopped at the last moment, forcing himself to remain still. "He was only a boy."

"He was in his mid-twenties," I corrected him.

"It was a lot of responsibility to shoulder all alone."

The man had wanted to help. I saw it clearly. "What did you want?"

"I wanted to put the two ranches, the Red Diamond and the White Ash, together. I never wanted to buy the ranch and put him off it."

"The Red Diamond was, is, his father's legacy. How could he not keep it forever?"

He cleared his throat. "Rand...."

I waited, but he just shook his head.

"Sir?"

His head turned to me, and I saw the same electric turquoise-blue eyes that the man I loved had. They were similar to Charlotte's. I used to think

hers and Rand's were the same, but hers were darker, like Glenn's, like their father's had been. Only Rand and Rayland had the same bright, distinctive, blue.

Electric blue.

Turquoise.

A blue you never forgot. A blue you noticed.

And only Rayland and Rand had them.

In the whole family.

But.... I squinted at him, and he looked away.

He cleared his throat. "I saw Rand at the Paulson auction in Sweetwater four months back. Did he tell you that?"

"No."

"He looked good." He said and I realized he wasn't really listening to me, lost in thought, thinking about Rand, a wistful look on his face. It was obvious that Rand was important to him but that made no sense.

I was so confused. *Did he hate Rand or not?* And I knew Rand looked good. Why tell me that he.... "I take good care of him," I told the older man, wanting him to know.

"Yeah, I done seen a change in him."

It was like being out in the middle of nowhere without a map. You had no idea which way to go. He had seen a change in Rand? He saw that the man was being taken care of. He accepted that fact, remarked on it, but still....

"Do you have a plan not to get killed?"

I was really so very lost. "I'm sorry?"

He turned to look at me. "For tomorrow, what's your plan?"

If he could start speaking English, it would be a bonus. "Could you tell me what you're talking about, please?"

"Well, I know you ain't fool enough to ride a bull 'cause it might just kill you when you're thrown off, so I was wondering which you were doin', the saddle bronc or bareback."

I had a very funny retort lined up for barebacking, but the question seeped into me and killed every trace of humor. "You're asking me

seriously what rodeo event I'm participating in?"

"Yep."

"Why would I do anything but watch?"

"Well because every rancher here has got to do an event. Glenn is riding the bull for the White Ash. Rand usually does the bull riding for the Red, but you can't do that. You'll get yourself killed. What event are you doin'?"

I had the urge to laugh, but I squelched it. Wait until I told Everett that I was planning to break my neck. "And if the rancher doesn't participate in the event?"

"Then the grazing rights transfer custody, of course."

Of course, of course, how stupid of me.

"I thought you would do one of the events today, something easier, but you're fixin' to get thrown in the arena. I will admit to looking forward to it."

Shit.

"You get killed in the ring, that ain't my fault."

"Sir." I cleared my throat, ready to change the subject. I wanted to talk to him, and continuing on about the next day's events would make me crazy. One catastrophe at a time was all I could handle, and I had things I wanted answers to. Like why in the hell did Rand Holloway and this man have the same exact color eyes? Talking to Everett about which event I might be able to walk away from with my spine still in one piece would have to wait. "Would you tell me about your ranch?"

"What the hell for?" he growled at me.

"I'd just like to hear."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

He was silent.

"What's it like?"

"Whaddya mean?"

"How big is the main house?"

"It has twelve rooms."

"Oh, shit."

"My father, Henry Holloway, built the White Ash thinking all his sons would live on it and work it together, but Tyler and James and Cyrus all left."

"So the White Ash belongs just to you or to the others as well?"

"Just to me. All the rest gave up their rights to it when they left to start their own ranches."

Tyler had owned a ranch? I badly needed a history lesson on the Holloways. "So you have room for me then."

"Where?"

"At your ranch. You have room, so I could visit."

"I suspect so."

"Okay then, I wanna see it."

"Suit yourself," he told me.

Suit myself? So I could stay there if I wanted to even though he hated me. How did that make any sense at all? The man had spit at my feet, but now I could pop over to his place for a beer? "Mr. Holloway, sir, you are not making a lot of sense."

"Oh, no?"

"No," I said, looking him in the eyes.

"Rand," he said, clearing his throat. "He cares for you, does he?"

Why did that even matter? "Yes."

He nodded, gave Bella a final pat, and then got up and walked away without another word.

"What the fuck?" I said to my dog.

She tipped her head like I was the one who was confused.

Going into the trailer, I got out of my pseudo club clothes, took a quick shower, and was lying in bed trying to think of who to call when it hit me, and I dialed Rand's mother, May.

"Stefan honey," she greeted me, and I could hear her smiling into the phone. "What a nice surprise."

"Hi, May, I hope it's not too late to call."

"It's only eleven at night, sweetheart. I'm not that old."

```
"Yes, ma'am," I sighed.
```

There was a loud bang and I realized that she'd dropped the phone on the floor.

```
"May?"
```

I heard her swear, which she never did, and then there was fumbling. She was good and flustered.

Quick cough before I got her back. "I'm sorry, I lost the—now what'd you say?"

"I need you to tell me about Rayland Holloway."

"Rayland?"

Her voice, the timber of it, up so high, basically sealed the deal for me. I knew what I needed to already. I just wanted to hear the story from her.

```
"What about him?"
```

"Could you run over the story for me, please?"

"What story is that?" she asked, her voice dripping with sugar.

"Why he's fighting with Rand."

"Sweetheart, he—"

"Please," I begged her. "I want to understand."

"How would I—"

"They have the same eyes, May."

"Who does?"

"I'm not stupid. Please don't talk to me like I am."

There was a long sigh. "What would you like to know?"

"Who's oldest?"

"What?" She laughed, but it was forced, breathless.

"Of the Holloway brothers."

[&]quot;What's on your mind?"

[&]quot;I'm confused."

[&]quot;About what?"

[&]quot;Rayland Holloway."

"Oh, well Tyler's the oldest, then James, then Cyrus, and then Rayland."

"Rayland said that Tyler had his own ranch too."

"He used to."

"What happened to it?"

"Well." Her voice evened out, and she sounded better because we were off Rayland and talking about something else. She was back on solid ground. "Sweetheart, Tyler used to drink quite a bit, and he went through a lot of women, and the last one, Dawn, well she wasn't like the others. She was smart. I think that's why she was the only one he really loved, but—and I really liked her, and what she did was wrong, but her reasons for doing it were sound."

"What'd she do?"

"Well, when she divorced Tyler, she took the ranch because by that time her name was on everything. And she did it for the people who lived on it and for the future of the ranch, but she put Tyler out of his home, and that nearly killed him."

"Does she still run the ranch?"

"Her son does."

"Tyler's son?"

"Mmmm-hmmm."

Jesus. "I thought Tyler didn't have any children."

"He has a son and a daughter."

"Christ, nobody tells me anything," I groused at her.

She laughed at me. "Well, sugar, it's not like they're close. I doubt Tyler's seen those kids in twenty years."

"Why?"

"You have to understand how broken he was after the divorce, Stef. He left with his tail between his legs and went to work as a roughneck in the oil fields."

"Then what?"

"Well, then James went to see him in Midland one summer. I don't remember when—I think right after Charlotte was born—and when he came home, Tyler was with him. James made him foreman, gave him the foreman's house, and he's been living on the Red Diamond ever since. He has been devoted to the ranch and first to James and then to Rand."

"That's so sad."

"Yes, it is, since his own son has a wonderful home and his daughter is a doctor in the same town. His kids are fine people. It's a shame he doesn't know them."

"You think he would ever want to?"

"At this point, that's not his call to make. It's theirs. If they want to see him, they know exactly where he is."

"Maybe he should extend them an invitation."

"He did maybe six years ago, and they both told him to go to hell."

I felt bad for Tyler, though his son and daughter's reaction made sense too. "Your family is a mess, May."

"The Holloways are a mess, Stef, not the Millers. My people actually talk to one another. They are not hard, stoic cowboys."

"Is Dawn still alive?"

"No, she passed about two years ago. She had breast cancer."

"That's too bad."

"Yes, it was. I still miss her."

"Did she remarry?"

"No. Holloway men are hard to get over."

It had taken May over twelve years to even think about loving another man after Rand's father had died. She had ended up marrying a very sweet man, Tate Langley, who was the complete opposite of the force of nature that her first husband was.

"Maybe if Tyler had passed, but he broke Dawn's heart. My cowboy never did that."

"Okay," I said, processing. "Now Rayland."

"Yes?" She was suddenly breathless again.

"Is he married?"

"He was. He's widowed now. Lily died five years ago come February."

"What did she look like?"

"Strange question." She hesitated.

"I'm just trying to figure something out, and I might have to draw out a Punnett square from high school biology class."

"Well she was beautiful, part Comanche. Rayland's son Zach has her eyes, that lovely chocolate brown."

"I see. So Rayland has Glenn who has dark blue eyes like James and Charlotte, and his son's Zach's are brown."

"Yes."

"And Rayland and Rand have the bright blue."

"Well, yes, they—"

"May?"

"Yes, Stefan?"

"Just because I'm blond, doesn't mean I'm stupid. It's a myth actually."

Silence on the other end.

"About blonds."

"Yes."

"May."

"Stefan, just—"

"I know why the man is so pissed, May, but he's hiding it behind homophobia and land rights and a whole mess of other stuff."

After a minute, I realized she was crying.

"Please tell me."

"You know already."

I took a breath. "Does Rand know that Rayland is his father?"

"No."

"Does Charlotte know?"

"Of course not!"

She was going to have a seizure when she found out. "That was brave of you, not telling her."

"Stefan, why are you even thinking about Rayland? How do you even know him?"

"Because we're spending quality time together here at the rodeo," I exhaled sharply.

"I'm sorry, where are you?"

"I'm at the Truscott Rodeo with the men, securing the grazing rights." Several moments of silence ticked by.

"Oh my God, Stefan," she gasped. "How did you even know that—"

"A very nice lady called me."

"Stef, honey, you can't be there."

"Too late, I'm here."

"And Rand is where?"

"With Zach at his ranch."

"Whatever for?"

"He's helping run his dude ranch for the weekend."

"And he has no idea that the rodeo was the same weekend?"

"No."

"So you're there in Truscott taking care of things."

"Yes."

"No, no, no, Stef, honey, if you're there in Rand's place, you have to participate in an event."

I should have talked to her earlier. "Yeah, I just heard this."

"Sweetheart, what are you planning to do?"

"Saddle bronc, bareback, or—"

"No!"

"At least if I rode the bull, it would be over fast."

"Stefan!"

"Who cares, May? I'll get thrown off either a horse or a bull tomorrow. That's fine. The important issue here is not me but Rayland. You do know that it's killing him not to claim his son. You do know that."

"I do," she whimpered, and I could hear the tears ready to pour out of her.

"Tell me what happened, May, please."

It had been, she told me, a love affair.

The first time May Miller saw Rayland Holloway, she was smitten at first glance. He had loved her back, but he was young and had still been the roaming kind, not the settling-down kind. She was ready to be a wife, to get married and start a family. Just the thought sent him running to the rodeo circuit. A month after he left, May discovered she was pregnant. Alone and afraid, she turned to her parents, fearing for the worst. They had surprised the hell out of her. They were both looking forward to seeing their grandchild.

"You have no idea about some people, Stef, until you test them."

So there was May, prepared to be a single parent, working at her father's feed store when three months later, James Holloway returned from Vietnam, just stopping to see his father on his way through town, excited to start his own ranch and begin a life in Winston away from his family. He was ready to be his own man, removed from his father's shadow. Henry Holloway had been thrilled at the change in his son, in the fire he saw in him, and gave him his blessing as well as the down payment for the land that he would build the Red Diamond on. James was excited to commit to his life, to the building of his dreams, and to finding a woman to share it all with. When he stopped at the store to pay his respects to her father, he saw May. She had grown up while he was away fighting on the other side of the world, and when he looked at her with his eyes on the future, ready to build his life from the ground up, he saw the woman whom he wanted to live his dream with him.

She had been flattered by the attention James lavished on her, but in the end it was only fair that she confessed the truth, that she was carrying his brother's child. She was surprised for the second time in a short amount of time when James told her that he didn't give a damn. He loved May—had, she found out, always loved her—and he would adore and shelter the child she was carrying. She wasn't convinced. So he went first to ask her father for her hand, and then he brought her a ring. When she told him no, she went home to fall apart in her bedroom. Her father sat with her while she sobbed, and told her that the choice was hers, she could stay with him and her mother forever, but he thought maybe she should take a chance on a

Holloway. The first had been too young, just a boy, but this one, James, was a man.

They were married and moved to Winston the following month. Rand was born five months later, and they waited to call and tell people until another four months had passed. No one could make the trip right away, and that was fine with James and May. With the timetable covered, they were free to go on with their lives without anyone knowing the truth, that Rand was not James Holloway's biological son.

Three years later, Rayland Holloway, finally ready to settle down, finished with the rodeo, and having married a woman he met in Tulsa, was on his way through Winston headed for home. He was bringing his new wife with him to his father's ranch, a ranch he would take over when Henry Holloway passed, and decided to stop to visit his brother. He was planning to tease May about how one Holloway was, it seemed, just as good as the other. It was a surprise visit, but it turned out that James and May were not the ones in for the shock of their lives.

He had driven down the long drive that led to the main house, and when he and Lily got out, they saw a little boy hanging on the fence. When he turned to them, Rayland almost passed out. May came out on the porch, saw his face, made one of her own, and he knew everything that she had wanted to hide. But James was there, too, and he invited Lily inside for some lemonade. It took Rayland two days to finally get May alone and drag the truth from her. She had told him that James knew and that none of them would ever speak of it.

Rayland wanted his son.

May told him that Rand was James's son and not his.

"You even named him after me." Rayland's voice had cracked wide open.

And she had, to be fair, but that was all in the past.

Rayland said he would divorce Lily and she could divorce James, and they could be married. But May would not do that to a man who was faithful and loving and whom she had come to love more than she even thought possible. As she had placed her hand on her abdomen, telling him that she was pregnant with James's child, she told him that he should make peace with his life. He and Lily, she was certain, would have beautiful children of their own.

"Can I ask," I sighed deeply. "What James thought about Rand?"

"No father was ever prouder or loved their son more, Stef," she told me. "You have to understand, Rand loved James, and James loved both his children fiercely and protectively. He knew Charlotte was the only one who was truly his, but Rand and he were exactly the same. All the values, the love of their family, of the land, their way of life, all of it... they were the same person. James passed on everything to Rand. I look at my son and don't see Rayland—I see James."

I swallowed hard. "So what happened between you and Rayland?"

"He went home to his father's ranch, the White Ash, and nine months after he married Lily, Glenn was born."

"And after James died?"

"Rayland came to buy the ranch, and Rand told him to go to hell. It was hard, watching them, because Rand was grieving for his father, and Rayland was there, right in front of him, wanting to tell him everything. It was horrible."

"Rayland says he didn't want to buy the ranch, just put the two together."

"When did he tell you this?"

"Tonight."

"You asked him?" she choked out.

"May, you know me. Of course I asked him."

"Jesus."

"But like I said, he says he didn't want to buy it."

"Well, all I know is what Rand told me, and Rand said the man wanted to buy it and then sell it, and Rand was not about to ever let that happen."

"Sounds like they maybe weren't actually listening to each other."

"Could be."

"May?"

"Yes?"

"I know you loved James. I saw you at his funeral. When did you fall in love with him?"

"I loved him for a long time, but after Charlotte was born," she sighed. "I saw how much he really loved Rand."

"I don't understand."

"Well, for three years, I figured that James was doing the best he could to love Rand, but that when a child of his own came along, that I would see the difference, and I might have to leave him. Rand deserved to be loved completely by a father or not at all."

"What happened after Charlotte was born?"

"Nothing."

"You lost me."

"I mean he didn't change one bit toward Rand and treated Charlotte the exact way he had when Rand was a baby. James loved his children the same, exactly the same, and loved me like crazy," she sighed. "And when I realized that James was a man who could love my child from another man as much as his own, I fell hard."

I smiled into the phone. "You finally let yourself fall in love with your own husband."

"Oh, yes."

There was no way I couldn't ask, I had to know. "Was he happy?"

"James used to say that the blessing of his life was being loved by a good woman and his children. The man loved his family more than anything."

I knew that. I had seen him with Rand and with Charlotte. He was gruff and hard, a man of very few words, but he never failed to hug them hello and goodbye, and at the end, he had even warmed to me.

"Can I ask why you think that Rayland just doesn't tell Rand the truth himself if he wants him to know so badly?"

"Because he knows as well as I do that there is no way in hell that Rand would ever believe him. It has to come from me."

"He's never tried to blackmail you into it?"

"He has no proof of anything. What's he going to tell Rand, that they have the same color eyes?" She sighed heavily. "And the only other person

Rand would have believed died a long time ago."

"Rand is his son."

"Rand is James Holloway's son. It's not who creates you, Stef, it's who raises you. You'll know what I mean once you and Rand have children. They might be half of you and half of Charlotte, but they will belong to you and Rand."

My head hurt and so did my heart. Wouldn't Rand want his own children once this came out?

"Stefan, honey, you're going to be a wonderful father and so will Rand. Don't let any of this put you off your plan. I know you. I know what you're thinking."

"I—"

"He wants you, Stefan, and if you think about it, Rand loves his father, and his father's genes are carried in Charlotte, not him. So really, a child out of you and Charlotte is what he wants. Does that make sense?"

It did, sort of. "God, May, this is a heavy burden to carry all these years."

"You have no idea."

"Rayland wants Rand to know."

"I know he does."

"I think it's tearing him up, and he's striking out, trying to get Rand to see him, to stay in his life, and unfortunately, right now all he's created is anger and animosity."

"Yes."

"Jesus, May, Tyler's kids, Rayland's kids, who isn't messed up?"

"Tyler's kids are doing fine, and Rand and Charlotte are both fine, thank you."

"Rand is not going to be fine and neither will Charlotte."

"Only if you tell my secrets, Stefan, and I would remind you that you have no right to. How people look at Rayland and Rand when they're together and not see that the son is almost a carbon copy of the father, I do not know. It used to twist my stomach into knots, so I was glad that we only saw them once a year at Christmas. I would see Rand with James and watch Rayland lookin' at them, and it would make me bawl like a baby."

- "I gotta go," I said, as my eyes filled. Christ.
- "Stefan, no, I want to talk to you about the rodeo."
- "It's fine, May. I'll be fine."
- "Not if you die being thrown off a horse."
- "Hopefully that won't happen."
- "Stefan Joss!"
- "Sorry."
- "You need to forget about the grazing rights and get on home. Rand cares more for you, love, than he does about some land."
- "No, I know." I didn't tell her that my plan was to go home with Rayland and Glenn. "Thank you for trusting me with the story, May. I love you."

"Oh honey, I love you too."

I hung up because she was crying and I was starting and God, what a mess!

Chapter 6

I had gone down to where the bucking chute was, dressed, as requested, more conservatively. But I was no longer blending. The black jeans and Prada boots, the charcoal gray sweater and sunglasses looked more Hollywood than Dallas.

"Hey." I smiled at Glenn when I found him.

His eyes ran over me. "What're you doing here?"

"You asked me to come see you ride."

"From the stands, asshole."

"Oh." I nodded. "Okay."

But he caught my shoulder when I turned to go, and eased me forward toward the side of the ring.

"You can sit up here, but don't fall off."

"I'm actually pretty coordinated," I assured him.

His eyes were locked on mine.

"Did your father tell you that he's letting me come home with you guys tomorrow?"

If he was surprised, I never saw it. "No, he didn't."

"I can't wait to see the ranch, Glenn."

He cleared his throat. "So you should bring your horse around to our trailer tonight after the dance 'cause we're leavin' around four in the morning."

"Okay."

"You can ride with me."

"Sounds good. Do you have room for Bella in your truck?"

"Who's Bella?"

"My dog."

"You're bringing your dog too?"

"If that's okay."

"Sure," he said softly, hand on the fence, leaning closer to me. "Bring your dog."

I noticed the flecks of green in his dark blue eyes. Really, all the Holloway men were just gorgeous creatures. "When we get to your ranch, I'll show you how well I can ride."

"I look forward to that," he said, reaching for me, his fingers sliding across my cheek. "Let me look at your eye."

I tilted my head so he could see, and he pressed gently at my skin.

"I am gonna kick the shit out of Gil Landry."

The man had no idea how possessive he sounded. "It's fine."

"It's not," he said as his fingertips slid down along the edge of my jaw and off me. "All right, get up there and don't move."

"Got it."

He left me then.

"What the fuck was that?"

I turned and found Everett. "Wow." I smiled wide. "Look at you. The chaps are hot."

He glared at me. "You cannot consort with the enemy."

"Take a pill," I laughed at him. "Oh hey, I need your advice. Should I ride the saddle bronc or ride the horse without a saddle?"

He turned his head to Chris, who had joined us. "Am I still drunk?"

"No, why?"

He looked back at me. "Tell Chris what you just said."

I put the same question to him that I had asked Everett. He grabbed for the fence.

"Okay." Everett pressed his lips together, turning to me. "Are you drunk?"

I had to explain fast, over Everett yelling and Chris looking like he was going to be sick, about the provision in the rights agreement.

"You can't ride saddle bronc or bareback!" Everett yelled at me. "You can't, Stef, you just can't. You'll get thrown off, and you'll die."

"I can't die. I have to go to the White Ash after."

"I'm sorry, I really am drunk," Everett deadpanned. "Did you say you were goin' to the White Ash after the rodeo?"

"Yeah."

"No."

"Yeah."

"Absolutely not," he laughed at me. "If I have to tie you up and throw you in the back of the trailer with your damn horse, that ain't happenin'. It's bad enough we did this without Rand knowing. If we go home and you ain't with us... might as well dig our graves ourselves."

"It's not like that. Rand will be fine."

"The hell you say! Rand Holloway is gonna string us all up by our balls!"

But I had bigger plans. "He won't. I'm just going for a visit with his family."

"Wait, look at me."

I rolled my eyes.

"What the fuck happened to your eye?"

"Gil Landry punched me."

His face drained of color.

"Everett," I chuckled. "Breathe."

"Are you kidding? Rand will—oh holy shit."

"I'll just wear these," I said, pulling the oversized sunglasses from the top of my head and putting them on. "See, no harm, no foul."

"He's gonna fuckin' kill us," Chris gagged.

"He can't actually do that."

"But he can make me want to kill myself by working me close to death."

"You're overreacting."

"If I was Gil Landry, I would be shitting bricks right about now."

"Why?"

"'Cause just 'cause you're a guy, don't mean that Rand don't see you as any less than any man here sees his wife. Gil forgot that and took a swing at you. You don't hit a man's spouse and walk away. The man should hide."

"Rand's not like that."

His eyebrows lifted. "You ain't never seen Rand Holloway really, truly angry, but I suspect you will soon."

"I've seen him mad plenty of times."

"You ain't never seen him in a fight."

"No, I haven't."

"I have. It's scary as hell. By the time he's that mad, somebody's fixin' to die."

"Well, let's not tell him then."

"He'll see the damage, Stef."

"Not if I'm out at the White Ash."

He growled at me.

"All of you guys need to learn to use words," I teased him.

Hands were thrown up in defeat. I loved to win.

Bull riding looks cool on TV and in movies, and if there is anything as romantic as a bull rider, I don't know what that is, but really, it's scary as hell to watch. An hour later when Everett was thrown from the back of the bull and then nearly trampled, my heart stopped for just a second. But once the man was standing behind the fence, I could breathe again.

Glenn was up after him, and he was thrown off as well, but he had stayed on the longest, so the announcer called out that he had probably won. That was the good part. The bad part came seconds later when the bull charged him.

I yelled a warning, lots of people did, but it was too late for him to do anything but turn. The bull caught him, and he was thrown into the fence. I heard the sickening snap of bone from where I was.

I ran for him, falling to my knees beside him. I saw the bull and curled over him, shielding his chest and head, I waved my arm and the bull stopped, whirling, before charging again. I yelled and was relieved to see the rodeo clowns. Three of them were there, circling, keeping the bull off me and Glenn.

"Stef."

I looked down at him. "Just lie there. We don't know what's broken."

"Get," he gasped and his voice broke, "out of here before you get yourself killed."

"Me. Who gives a damn about me," I grumbled, reaching for him. "Lay still."

The ambulance was there fast, and as they were loading Glenn in the back, I darted over and shook each man's hand who had saved my life. I guessed that the guys dressed as clowns didn't normally get thanked from their bemused expressions. They seemed genuinely pleased that I had taken the time to express my appreciation. I ran back and got into the ambulance, and we whipped out of the arena.

"What are you doing?" Glenn barked at me as the paramedic checked him over.

"Going with you, of course."

"You don't have to—"

"Shut up, Glenn," I ordered.

"I—"

"Let's shut up, Glenn," the paramedic told him.

He shut up.

The ride to the hospital took a half an hour, and when we got there, they rolled him into the back with me following, after I explained that I was his brother.

"You don't have to stay here," he grumbled as the nurse took his temperature.

"Yes, I know."

"Don't fuss at your brother," the nurse cautioned him.

He rolled his eyes, but stopped talking when I smirked at him.

"Do you ever listen?"

I waggled my eyebrows. "You should ask Rand."

Emergency room time is like basketball time; it's endless. After the preliminary exam, he had to get X-rays and then back to the room, and as I sat and filled out paperwork, I had to wonder where his father was or any of the men from the ranch. Why was I the only person there?

They gave him a shot, and he fell asleep after that, but he woke up when the doctor was setting his arm. It wasn't nearly as bad as they had first thought. It was a clean break above his wrist, so he was expected to make a full recovery.

"He'll be in this probably eight weeks considering he's a rancher and he's gonna want to use it," the doctor was telling me when Glenn's eyes fluttered open.

"So your brother here chose dark blue for the cast," Doctor Charles Patel told him. "And as I was just telling him, eight weeks in this easy."

Glenn groaned.

"How ya feel?"

"Like I got trampled by a bull," he grumbled.

"You're right." The doctor grinned at me. "He is funny. I'll be right back."

He left and I was alone with Glenn.

"Why are you still here?"

"Because you're still here, idiot." I smiled at him. I was sitting beside him on the bed, but apparently he hadn't noticed that yet.

He closed his eyes, resting his broken arm on his chest. "Why dark blue?"

"So the cast will set off your eyes," I cackled.

"I really hate you."

"Yeah, I know."

"I gotta fill out the insurance forms."

```
"I did that already."
     "You did?"
     "Yes. I did."
     "How'd you do that? You go through my wallet?"
     "Yep."
     "Christ."
     "At least they let you keep your underwear."
     "You checked, did you?"
     "Of course," I teased him, patting his chest, shifting to move.
     He put his hand over mine, pressing my palm down into his chest.
"Thank you for staying."
     "You're welcome."
     His eyes rolled open, and I saw how bright and shiny they were, how
glassy. The man was really out of it.
     "Glenn," I chuckled. "Close your eyes, rest for a little bit."
     He was just staring up at me.
     "Glenn?"
     He made a noise in the back of his throat.
     "What's wrong?"
     "Rand's a lucky man." His eyes drooped, but drifted back open.
     "That's very nice of you to say."
     "You hate me, huh?"
     "No. I don't."
     "You don't?"
     "No," I assured him as his fingers slid between mine.
     "Good," he said, losing the battle to keep his eyes open.
```

 I_{T} turned out that I didn't need to call a cab because Rayland Holloway showed up an hour later to collect his son. He was not that excited to find me there with Glenn, but he appreciated it. Glenn sat between us on the ride

back to the fairgrounds, and promptly passed out, his head bumping my shoulder when he fell asleep.

"He seems comfortable with ya."

"He's not the homophobic asshole I thought he was."

"And I am, is that it?"

"I didn't say that, but you're awfully defensive."

He grunted at me.

"You know, it's funny, but did you ever think about what's going to happen to your ranch when you die?"

"Well that's a fine thing to say."

"I just mean, you can't abide sodomites," I said softly, using his word. "But you have no way of knowing who any of your sons will end up loving."

His knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

"Love is a funny thing, Mr. Holloway."

He was silent.

When I got back, I found out that the bareback riding had begun in my absence. I went quickly to the registration tent and made sure they had me down for the saddle bronc. It turned out that Hud Lawrence already had me riding in that event, and had my number ready and everything. As it had been the only category that none of my hands had signed up for, it was the one he had put me into.

"Thank you, Mr. Lawrence." I smiled at him.

"You're very welcome," he said, like it made all the sense in the world to him. "You know, Rand normally rides the bull, but you're built more for saddle bronc."

I wasn't built for anything, but I smiled and nodded instead of arguing.

"The event starts in an hour. You best go get ready, grab your rope and chaps."

I ran back to my trailer to try and find something else to wear. I was out of cowboy clothes, and so was rooting around in Pierce's clothes since he was the closest to my size, when the door opened and Everett and Dusty walked in.

"Hey." I smiled big at them. "Mr. Lawrence says I need a rope and chaps. Can one of you guys explain the mechanics of this to me?"

Dusty went white as a sheet, and I made him sit down, put his head between his knees, and breathe while I got him some water. Everett was yelling again.

"Goddamn it, Stef, you don't run into a ring with a bull!" He was yelling about earlier when I had tried to save Glenn from being turned into guacamole.

I shrugged as I fanned Dusty with my *People* magazine.

"Where is he?" I heard someone yell from outside the trailer.

"Seriously," I told Everett as Chris and Tom pushed their way into the small space.

"Who's riding bareback?" I asked.

"Pierce," everyone said at once.

"And Chase is watchin' out for him," Chris told me.

"Okay," I said, "who's got chaps I can borrow?"

You would have thought I was asking to borrow a jock. The looks on their faces were just outright horror.

Never, ever, in a million years would I have ever thought that I would be up on a horse in a bucking chute. It was just so far out of the realm of possibility. But so was the fact that when I was up there, looking out across the arena and to the side, I saw Rayland Holloway walking toward me. When he reached me, Dusty moved so the owner of the White Ash could take his place.

"I'll give you a pass on this, Stefan," he told me, and I was surprised that we were on a first-name basis. "I never thought you'd have the balls to be up on this animal."

"You mean Widow Maker here?" I tried to chuckle, but my mouth was too dry. The horse was antsy and stamping its feet and not helping me

get my nerves under control even a little bit.

"The horse's name is Argent," he told me, "and he belongs to my neighbor Waylon Taylor who owns the Triple Sage."

"I thought broncos were wild."

He scowled at me. "That horse is worth ten grand, and it's no more wild than your dog. All ranchers have some rough stock. Rand does, too, I'm sure."

"What's rough stock?"

"Like horses that don't get rode 'cept at the rodeo," Everett translated for me. "Just mind what you're fixin' to do here and don't worry 'bout nothin' else."

He did not want my mind wandering, didn't want me distracted.

"Okay." I nodded, trying to remember everything he and Dusty and Chris had been barking at me.

"So get on down," Rayland suddenly ordered. "I'll let you keep the grazing rights."

"But that's not just your call," I argued. "It's you and all the other ranchers, and if they don't agree, then we've come this far to fail, and I can't have that."

"It's me. I own more of the land than anyone, and if I say you're fine, then you're fine, you pigheaded piece of crap!"

Unfortunately, it was the last thing he got to say to me because the chute opened then, and the horse, with me on it, charged forward.

Eight seconds. You can count it on your fingers. It seems like nothing. Anything can happen in eight seconds. It's over in a heartbeat. Eight seconds is a completely forgettable amount of time, unless you're on top of an animal.

I had seen Everett on the bull that morning, Glenn as well. It didn't look that hard from the ground. When I flew into San Francisco from Hawaii four years ago, the plane hit a serious patch of turbulence. Offroading in a jeep had been bumpy, and I had even been in a car accident once, with Charlotte, where the car had flipped over. But nothing at all in my life prepared me for riding a psychotic horse with no other desire than to have me off of him.

I understood why there was no horn on the saddle; my balls would have been smashed into goo if there was. The free-swinging stirrups made my legs feel like a marionette. I felt like I was doing the splits. I had tried to remember what Dusty said about making sure that my feet, my boots, were close to the horse's shoulders before his front legs hit the dirt. I tried to do everything my men had told me. I tried to hold on to the rein that was attached to the halter on the horse. God, I really tried. And eight tiny little seconds seemed like cake in my head. How long could eight seconds possibly be?

Eight seconds is the magic number because the animal, bull or horse, gets tired after that. So they say. For me, the horse went up, I went up, the horse came down, I did too, and then once more up and then I was free, and I felt like a balloon sailing through the sky. If only I were as light as a helium-filled piece of plastic and didn't have the whole gravity thing to worry about.

I hit so hard, dust came up, and I couldn't breathe because my lungs imploded on impact and my back was broken. And my last conscious thought was that people did it for a living on purpose and for the love of God why? And then there was thunder and nothing else.

Chapter 7

 $I_{\rm F}\,I$ was dead, everything would not smell like manure. This was my logic, so I figured I was still breathing. When I opened one eye, I heard a gasp.

"Oh God, thank you, thank you, thank you."

My other eye opened, and I saw Everett. "Hey," I said, but my voice sounded bad, scratchy and rough.

"Just lay there and don't move and try not to scare the shit out of me anymore for one day."

I nodded.

"Don't move!" he barked at me. "The ambulance is coming."

"No, I don't wanna go to the hospital."

"We'll see," he said, hovering over me.

But I knew my body better than anyone else, so when he turned to look, for the paramedics or the ambulance or whoever he was expecting, I rolled sideways and got to my feet.

"What the fuck?" he yelled at me as a cheer went up from the stands and Dusty and Chris and Tom and Pierce and Chase joined us in the ring.

Dusty was all over me, and I put one arm across his shoulders and the other on Chase and let them help me from the middle of the arena. They walked me to a gate, lifted me off my feet and carried me through. On the other side, the paramedics were there on standby, and I was put on the back of their truck so they could check me over.

I told them my name and the name of my ranch, Dusty explained what had happened since apparently they had not seen my spectacular ride for themselves, and Chase told them how I had fallen and how hard and how fast. He was worried about my head.

Dusty was worried about my neck.

Chris was concerned about my ankle because I couldn't put any weight on it.

Everett was with Chase and worried about my head. He felt that my pupils were way too big.

"Did I win?" I asked Glenn Holloway as he reached us.

"Fuck no," he growled at me. "You were only on the horse like two seconds."

"Really? It felt like so much longer."

"I expect so," he said, reaching out and curling a stray lock of hair around my ear. "Jesus Christ, Stefan, my father said you didn't have to ride."

"He was late." I smiled at him as the nice lady paramedic shone a light in my eyes.

"Okay, Mr. Joss," she said softly.

"Stef," I corrected her.

"Stef." She smiled, gesturing behind me. "We're gonna have you lie down, all right?"

"Why?"

"Because I think you have a concussion."

"Really?"

"Oh yes, really."

"A bad one?"

"I'm not sure, so we're going to take a trip to the hospital."

"I'm coming with you," Glenn told me.

My smile was wide. "Two trips in one day. How bright are we?"

"Oh, yeah," the nice lady paramedic said sarcastically. "This whole rodeo thing is brilliant."

"We'll follow," Everett told me.

"No, no, no." I grabbed his hand as I saw spots. "Stay here and pick up any trophies and make sure that the ranch participation and mine is recorded." "One of us needs to go with you," he argued with me, and I noticed that his expression, usually twisted into a scowl, was really very concerned.

"Don't worry. Rand really isn't going to hurt you."

"It's you I'm worried about, Stef, not Rand."

And I would have said something comforting, but I suddenly needed to throw up.

 $T_{\rm HE}$ concussion was mild, my reaction to it, for whatever reason, was not. I was sensitive to light, I was nauseous, and my head was throbbing so hard that they gave me a shot of pain medication. After that, I was just fine. They wanted me to stay overnight, but I didn't want to. I had to be in a truck at four in the morning.

"I'll watch him," Glenn promised the doctor, and I waved.

My ankle, as it turned out, was not the problem. I had broken my right fibula, which was better than breaking my tibia or my ankle, but which still hurt like crazy. I was given a second dose of pain medication after they put my leg, from knee to foot, in a cast.

"I'm surprised you didn't break your neck the way you landed," Glenn told me, and from the look in his eyes and the sound of his voice I was guessing that I had scared the crap out of him. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

I tipped my head at his cast. "Grazing rights, asshole, just like you."

"But I've ridden a bull before."

"Which makes the fact that you got hurt just like I did that much funnier," I laughed at him. "What time is it anyway?"

"It's a little after six," he told me.

"Well, are you driving me back to the rodeo, or are we walking?"

"I have a date," he told me. "We're catching a cab."

I agreed and asked for pain medication to go. The doctor, Norman Aust, did not want me to leave, but after I lied and said that Glenn would watch me like a hawk, he agreed to let me go.

"Sorry," I told him as I hobbled out on my crutches, "I think doc thinks that you're my boyfriend."

"That's alright," Glenn grumbled, walking behind me.

"Oh yeah? It's okay my doc thinks you're a homo? Thinks you're queer?"

"God, you are fucked up. Get in the cab."

I got in and kept up a steady, rambling dialogue for Glenn all the way back to the campgrounds. Once we were there, he was going to walk me back to my trailer, but I had called ahead, and Everett and Dusty were there to meet me.

"Hey!" I greeted them, and the looks I got of absolute horror were funny.

They talked while I hobbled, and halfway there I stopped and explained to them that the whole walking with crutches thing was exhausting.

"This really sucks." I smiled at them. "And don't look at me like I'm crazy. I'm not crazy."

Everett just shook his head as he took my crutches away, put my arm over his shoulder and waited while Dusty positioned himself under my other one. I moved a lot faster with them on either side of me.

My shower was an experience, and I wanted a nap when I was done. Wrapping my cast in garbage bags was a pain in the ass, but since I couldn't get it wet, I had no choice. And I was dirty and gritty and there was sand in my hair, so I had to get clean. Bella put her head in my lap when I was done and didn't even try and wrestle my socks from me like she normally did. I stretched one of my black socks over the outside of the bottom of the cast because otherwise, my toes would freeze off. I had no idea how I was going to drive or ride Ruby or do anything at Rayland's ranch. I was thrilled the rodeo was officially over.

Dusty and Everett and the others came to collect me, and you would have thought that all of them had broken their legs instead of me. I had to take some Vicodin, and because I hadn't eaten all day, it made me kind of loopy and a little queasy. I needed food.

They all stuck close to me through dinner, and then I was escorted to the bleachers. I sat there and clapped and cheered, whistled and yelled when every category was called. The only two events that another ranch won were the bull riding that Glenn Holloway had taken and the saddle bronc, which the Twin Oaks took. But my ride was not the worst, only second to the worst, which filled me with a small amount of pride. I was pleased to see Glenn walk up onto the stage and receive the appreciation of the crowd. Rachel Webber, his date for the evening, was glowing.

A different band took center stage the second night; this one was tame, all covers, no original music at all. But they were decent, and the dancing was in full swing as I was looking for Rayland Holloway. I wanted to find out where to meet him at four in the morning. I didn't see the man anywhere, but I saw Glenn, and even though I didn't want to interrupt his date with Rachel, I crossed to the table where they were.

"Stef," Glenn greeted me with a warm smile, standing up to take my hand. "I never did thank you for earlier. Apparently that bull was gonna stomp all over me if you hadn't gotten there when you did. I guess a lot of people got it on their phones, and between last night and today, I think you're a hit on YouTube."

And that was funny for like a second and a half.

Rand.

I was so dead if he saw it.

I forced a smile. "Well, you returned the favor when you went with me to the hospital, so thank you back."

"You all right on those?" He gestured at the crutches.

"Sure."

"Maybe you should rest, huh?"

"Maybe," I agreed, looking at Rachel. "You look beautiful tonight."

She flushed beet red, and I bent and kissed her cheek.

"And you are very good for my ego, Mr. Joss." She beamed up at me. "I'm so glad you're all right. You gave us all quite a scare earlier."

"Thank you, ma'am."

My eyes were back on Glenn and his on me. "Are you still coming home with us tomorrow?"

"I am if you tell me where to meet you."

"I'll come by in the morning and get you and your horse and your damn dog," he told me, his eyes glowing.

"She's a cute dog. You'll like her."

"My dad says she's scary as hell."

"She won't be scary to you."

"Good." He nodded.

"I'll see you in the morning then."

"In the morning."

I left them and found a seat to watch the line dancing. It was a much smaller crowd than the previous night, and most people were leaving, as it was already Sunday night a little after nine and most people had to work the following day. I was enjoying watching Rand's men dancing and didn't even notice when Carly Landry took a seat beside me until she cleared her throat, and I turned my head.

"Hi," I greeted her.

"I'm so sorry about my brother, Stefan."

"It's okay." I went back to watching the dancers, using my crutch to move a chair over next to me so I could elevate my leg. "He loves you. I get it."

"But it doesn't excuse him hitting you."

"I'll live," I told her, adjusting my ankle on the chair to take the weight of the cast.

"I think that...."

I waited a second before I looked back at her. "You think what?"

Her face was pinched with pain. "I'm sorry, but I think just like my brother does, that this is a phase for Rand. He's going to come out of this, and when he does, he's going to come looking for me."

She was holding on to that hope so hard, so tight. I was going to say something when my phone rang. Seeing the number, his number, on my display, my heart sank.

"Excuse me," I said, slowly getting to my feet, the crutches hard to maneuver while I was trying to answer my phone.

"Oh no, Stef, please stay."

"I have to take this. My...." I hesitated. I didn't want to hurt her feelings. "Best friend wants to talk to me."

"Oh, of course." She smiled at me. "But please do come back."

"Do me a favor?"

"Of course."

I left one crutch leaning on the table. "Will you ask my friend Everett to bring this back to the trailer for me? You remember him from the awards, right?"

"Sure." She smiled at me.

I nodded, and started walking away with one crutch as I hit the answer button on my phone. "Hi, I missed you."

"Did you? I don't know how. You've been so busy saving people from fuckin' bulls!"

"Wait—"

"Jesus Christ, Stef, you must've taken ten years off my life with that shit!"

Oh, he was mad, and he didn't even know the best part yet. "See—"

"Your ass better be in the truck headed for home right fucking now!"

I laughed at him. "That's actually not possible."

"Why the fuck not?"

"Well, I promised—"

"And what the fuck were you doing parading around in those jeans and that shirt last—"

"Parading?"

"You are not allowed to put on your fuck-me clothes if I ain't there to do the fucking!"

And for whatever reason, I could not stop smiling. "Is that right?"

The growl of frustration made my smile nuclear.

"Did you think I was hot?"

"Stefan, so help me God, I am going to beat the living—"

"Who sent it to you?"

"Stef—"

"Who?" I laughed, wondering if it was Everett or Chris or Dusty.

"Pierce."

"That little narc," I chuckled. "It's always the quiet ones."

"You are in so much trouble."

"Why? I came to save the grazing rights, Rand. How can I be in the wrong?"

"Did it ever occur to you that I own a very successful business and that one of the marks of a good businessman is being organized? What makes you think I didn't know the damn rodeo was this weekend?"

"You had no idea," I told him, "until someone told you—I'm thinking Zach."

He grunted.

"Don't get all self-righteous on me. That's bullshit."

"Fine, I didn't know, but I wouldn't have wanted you there alone."

"I'm not alone. I have half the ranch with me!"

"But I'm not there!"

"So what? You're where you needed to be, and I'm where I needed to be. It all worked out for the best."

"Why didn't you tell me where you were going?"

"Why didn't you tell me you missed this rodeo for the last two years?"

"Because it had nothing to do with you or us, so why would I mention it?"

"Rand, I don't just wanna know about stuff that affects you and me. I wanna know about everything. And I definitely want to know everything about your family."

There was a long silence, and I had to stop and lean on the fence. I really needed to lie down.

"Rand?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you need to know everything?"

"Because if I'm really your partner and you want me to stick around, then your family is my family."

"You know I want you to stick around."

"Then?"

He took a breath. "Okay."

"Okay what?"

"Okay my family is your family, asshole."

I laughed at him. "I appreciate it."

"I want you to come home."

"I will."

"When?"

"Soon."

"God, what a mess."

I was about to give the man heart palpitations, so I decided to change the subject while I still could. "You know, all the guys have been worried about what you were gonna do to them when you found out they came with me."

"They're your men as much as mine. That all made sense to me."

God, I loved him.

"And I understand since I didn't tell you, why you raced off to protect my rights, your rights to—"

"I did it for you, Rand. I mean I know that the ranch is half mine, and I used that this weekend to my benefit, but when I think of it, I think of you."

He was quiet.

"Rand?"

"I used to think of the ranch and think of my father." He took a breath. "You saying that you think of me—that might be the best thing you've ever said, after you love me and you were gonna stay."

My throat hurt.

"But you should have told me what you were doing, where you were going."

"Yes, I should have."

```
"I'm sorry, did you say I was right?"
```

I laughed at him. "Hey, I know this is gonna sound stupid since I came here and everything, but I was thinking that maybe you should give Rayland the grazing rights?"

It took him a minute to respond. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't really need to graze the cattle here, do you?"

Nothing.

"Rand?"

"No, I don't."

"You have other land, but Rayland only has this and his ranch."

"What's your point?"

"I just think that there's a lot of bad blood between you and him, and I think it would go a long way to making peace."

"And why do I care about that?"

"Because we're talking about your family."

"Lemme understand. You want me to just give the man my share of thousands of acres of land just because you think it would be a nice gesture?"

"I think it would be an olive branch."

"Uh-huh."

"Rand—"

"After what he just did to me? Are you kidding?"

"I just want you to think about it."

"I'm thinking about a lot of things, Stef, but I'm not ready to do anything with that land right this second, all right?"

That was fair. "All right."

"Okay, so my cousin Zach is gonna sell his ranch." He exhaled deeply.

"Really."

[&]quot;Don't be an ass."

[&]quot;According to you, I already am one."

"Yeah, he's done. He's not sure what he wants to do, but he's tired of ranching, and from seeing his men this weekend, they're tired of being there with him. I offered a few of them jobs, and two of them are taking me up on it."

"And the others?"

"The others don't wanna work for a gay man."

"I'm sorry, Rand."

He grunted. "It's their loss, Stef. It's a privilege to work on the Red Diamond. I won't ever beg anyone to take my hand."

His pride made me smile. I loved the confidence in the man's voice.

"Except for you, that is," he laughed softly. "You, I will beg."

"It's not necessary."

"No?"

"No."

"Okay then, Stef, please come home."

"Not yet."

"See, it ain't workin' not to beg."

"I have things to do first."

"Like what?"

"Like getting you to give the grazing rights to Rayland."

"We just put that conversation to bed."

"Let's wake it up."

"So you're saying if I agree to give the grazing rights to my uncle right now, you would come home?"

It was my one card to play.

"Yes."

"Done," he said without pause.

"Great," I sighed. "So I'll meet you on the White Ash, and you can give Rayland the grazing rights."

"Oh fuck no!"

"Oh fuck no, what?"

"Oh fuck no, you are not going out to the White Ash!"

I smiled into the phone. "Why don't you meet me there?"

"Stef." His voice lowered in warning.

"Or wait for me at home."

"Stef."

"I need you to see Rayland."

"Why?"

It was not my place to say. "I just do, and Glenn needs our help."

"Glenn? Since when do you care about Glenn?"

"Because your family should be together, Rand, not apart," I told him. "The grazing rights will smooth the way with Rayland, and Glenn likes me so—"

"Likes you?"

"Yeah, we're friends."

"You and my cousin are friends?"

"Yeah."

"Since when?"

Since the hospital two times, but I didn't want to say that, so I went with the other. "He saved me from Gil Landry."

Beats of time passed. "I'm sorry?"

"You know, Glenn really wants to start a restaurant, and I want to help him with that, and I really think he needs a friend, and he held my hand so tight today at the hospital that I think—"

"Held your hand?"

"Glenn is on the verge of either taking a left turn to greatness or making a right into mediocrity and loneliness."

"That's very dramatic."

I was still hopped up on pain medication. "He could be just like you if we help him."

"Like me?"

"Yeah. Happy. You're happy, aren't you?"

Silence.

"Aren't you?"

"Not right this second," he groused at me.

Just thinking about him scowling on the other end made me smile.

"Yes, Stef, I'm happy," he admitted grudgingly.

"Well then, come pick me up at the White Ash, okay?"

He was silent and so was I.

"You talked to my mother, didn't you?"

It was lucky that I was still holding on to the corral fence. "Yes."

He made a noise of understanding, and suddenly the light came on for me as well.

"Your dad," I sighed.

"Of course," he said irritably. "James Holloway never backed down from anything, least of all the truth. He told me a long time ago that Rayland was my biological father."

I coughed. "Your mother doesn't know, you know."

"Yeah, I know. Rayland doesn't know I know either."

Longest damn weekend of my life.

"Who told you?"

"I figured it out and then made your mother tell me."

"How did you figure it out when no one else can?"

"Because I really look at you, and I will notice anyone else who looks like you," I told him. "I always thought of you and Charlotte as having the exact same color eyes, but even Charlotte's are darker than yours. She's got that violet color, and Glenn's are cobalt, but yours are all your own except for—"

"Rayland."

"Yeah."

"And so, were you gonna say something to me?"

"You know I was. How could I not?"

"Even though it wasn't your secret to tell?"

"There can't be anything between us, Rand, or we won't make it."

"I agree, and so you know, that means something to me. The fact that you would take my side before anyone else, that you would tell me even if you thought I wouldn't believe you—that's a big deal, Stef."

"But I had no doubt that you would believe me."

"What? You think I would take your word over anyone else's, even my mother's?"

"Of course," I said matter-of-factly. I had been worried about how hurt Rand would be. It never even crossed my mind to think that I would need to convince him that I was telling the truth. "I know you trust me."

He took a long breath. "I wanna see you real bad."

The ache in his voice twisted me up inside. "Rand, let's just get everything out in the open, all right? Come to the ranch, talk to Rayland, talk to Glenn. Let's have a good old-fashioned knock-down, drag-out fight. Bring Tyler, bring Zach. I'll call Charlotte. It's time. Secrets have a way of festering. Aren't you sick of it?"

"I don't think on it much, but I would like my mother to know that I know. It might let her sleep better, and Charlotte should know that I'm only half her brother."

"I doubt it will change anything."

"We'll see."

He sounded sad, and it hurt to hear, but I knew that Charlotte loved him, and I knew, too, that nothing would ever change that.

"Call your mother, will you?"

"Yessir, I will."

"And then come to the ranch and talk to Rayland."

"All right."

"And pick me up while you're at it."

"Anything else while you're barking out orders?"

"No, that's it," I sighed happily.

"So," he said softly. "Why did Glenn have to save you from Gil Landry?"

Amazing. After everything, all the talking we'd done, all the revelations of the past few minutes, the man had still retained that tiny piece of information.

"Who cares?"

"Oh, I fuckin' care." His voice lowered ominously. "What happened?"

"It's no big deal. Gil Landry took a swing at me, and Glenn stopped him from doing anything more than put me on the ground."

There was no sound at all, like he wasn't even breathing.

"Rand?"

He coughed. "I'm sorry, what?"

"You heard me," I chuckled. "My buddy Gil really wants you to marry his sister."

"I see."

"So, when are you coming to Rayland's ranch?"

"When are you leaving?"

"At some horrible hour of the morning," I groaned. "Jesus, Rand, four is not a time decent people wake up."

"It's the time ranchers get up," he assured me, and he was trying to sound playful, but his tone was stilted and cold.

"Rand?"

"Just let it be, all right? I'll see you at the ranch tomorrow."

"I can't wait to see you."

"Me too, baby." His voice rumbled, and my heart leaped in my chest.

"I really enjoyed the rodeo, you know."

"Next time we'll go together."

"It's a deal," I sighed, but my leg throbbed, and so I winced without even meaning to.

"What hurts?" he asked gently.

"Nothing."

He chuckled, "Has anyone ever told you that you're a really shitty liar."

"Really? I think it's more the opposite actually."

"Then maybe it's just me."

"Could be." I smiled into my phone.

"Tell me what's wrong."

I cleared my throat. "I'm fine. Just got a little banged up today."

"When? I watched the video with the bull on the website, and it didn't look like you got hurt."

This was news. "The rodeo has a website?"

"Yeah, it's what Pierce sent me the link for. They put highlights from the rodeo up to get people to come next year, you know?"

"That makes sense."

"I'm on the website right now."

The warning buzzer went off in my head. "Well, shouldn't you—"

"Stef."

"Yes?"

"There seems to be a.... How did you get hurt, Stef?"

I coughed. "What are you looking at?"

"I'm waiting for something with your name on it to load."

"It's probably more of me auctioning off bachelors."

"I don't think so."

"You should watch Everett and Chris doing the team roping. It was really some—"

"What is this?" he asked, talking to himself.

"Rand."

"Man, this is taking forever."

There was no getting around it. "Rand, you know that every rancher has to compete in the rodeo, right? I mean actually compete himself or herself to secure the grazing rights?"

"Sure," he told me.

I waited because my beautiful, sexy cowboy would work it out in a minute.

"What're you... wait."

I braced for an explosion.

"Oh, fuck," he breathed out.

"I'm fine."

"Whah... Stef—what'd you do?"

I took a breath. "I can't ride a bull like you, and after I got back from the hospital with Glenn, the only event left was the saddle bronc."

There was a catch of breath but nothing else.

"Rand?" I said after a minute because a slow feeling of dread was starting to sink into me.

"No." He sounded like he was going to throw up. "What is—no."

"Don't watch anything."

"Why not?"

"Because it'll just upset you, and I'm fine," I told him. "I just broke my leg."

He sucked in his breath.

"And just the lower part of my leg. It's no big deal."

The phone was muffled, and I was pretty sure that the man I loved was in all possibility, coughing up a lung. When he hung up, I was confident that it was to spare me the sounds of him retching. I took the opportunity to continue my limp toward the trailer. I sighed deeply when it was in sight. My phone went off, and I saw Rand's number pop back up on the display.

"You all right?"

"No." He sounded sick and mad at the same time.

"I'm all in one piece."

"Looks like a lot of people took video of you."

"Because I'm pretty," I teased him.

"Stef—"

"Did you watch one yet?"

"Not yet... it's still loading."

Which meant the file was huge either because it was really long or in really high definition. Either way, I did not want him seeing it. "Don't watch it."

"Why not?"

"Because you got sick just think—"

"Here it is," he said.

"Are you home? Where are you?"

"I'm at Zach's. The guests are gone, and I'm in his study. I'm gonna leave in the morn.... I'm... I'm... oh my God." He exhaled.

"But you should see me. I'm fine. You're talking to me. You can tell from my voice that I'm fine."

He was quiet. I couldn't even hear him breathing, or not breathing.

"Rand?"

"Wait."

"Rand, just—"

"I said wait!"

He sounded really bad, and it was heart-wrenching to hear him so worried about me. I was quiet for long minutes.

Finally, he cleared his throat. "Do you have a concussion?"

"I—"

"It's a simple question, Stef. Do you or do you not have a concussion?"

"What even makes you ask that question?"

"Because of how hard you hit the dirt."

"Oh."

"Stef."

"Yeah, I have a slight concussion."

"And you broke your leg?"

"Just my fibula, the small bone, not the big one," I told him.

"I know what a fibula is."

"Okay," I said because he was scaring me with how calm he sounded.

"You know, concussions are tricky. Somebody's supposed to either keep you awake or watch you all night long. You got someone there to do that?"

"No, Rand, I—"

"Is there someone there I don't know about who's fixin' to take care of you like I could take care of you?"

His voice was rising.

- "No, Rand, you—"
- "And you're planning to go to the White Ash tomorrow?"
- "Yes," I said, not even sounding like me.
- "So since you and Glenn are so close now, may—"
- "There's no way you're jealous of your cousin," I told him.
- "No?"
- "Knock it off," I told him. "My head hurts, and you're screwing with me. It's not nice."

He sucked in his breath. "Okay, here's what's gonna happen. I'm gonna leave for the airport right now, and you are gonna stay right there and wait for me. Do you understand?"

"I can't. The rodeo's over, Rand. I can't stay here. The guys need to get back to the ranch, and I made a promise to Rayland and Glenn to get out to White Ash. I won't break my promise after I spent the weekend getting both of them to trust me. I—"

"You can wait for me. No one will throw you out of that trailer. No one's expected to leave until noon tomorrow."

"People are leaving already."

"Not the people who brought stock and horses, Stef. None of the ranchers or their men are leaving until tomorrow."

"Glenn and Rayland are leaving at like—"

"You're not. You're staying right there and waiting for me."

"Rand—"

"Stefan Joss! Do you understand?" he shouted.

"I want to see the White—"

"You don't, Stef, not really. I know you. You wanna come home. What you want is for me to sign over the grazing rights. What you want is for me to clear things up with Rayland and my mother, and you want me to find out from Glenn how serious he is about the damn restaurant."

And I did. I wanted all of that.

"I'll talk to everyone, I swear I will, but I will do it on my terms on my ranch. If they wanna talk to me, they come see me, not the other way around. Do you understand?" Rand had his pride, and it was not my place to try and strip that from him. "Yes."

"I am coming there to fetch you home, and that's all. Maybe before you got hurt, I would have followed you out to my uncle's ranch, but not now."

I really wanted to go home.

"Now you come home, Stef, end of discussion."

There was no fight left in me. I needed him, needed to see him. "Okay."

"You're supposed to teach class on Tuesday, or have you forgotten?" Crap. I had, actually.

"You're lucky tomorrow's Columbus Day, or you'd really be screwed."

He was right. "Come get me."

"Do not fuckin' move. Where's the goddamn trailer?"

"I have the last one before the open range."

"Fuck!"

He was still very upset. "But, Rand, I'm—"

"If you say you're fine one more goddamn time, I will fuckin' lose it. Do you understand me? Are you fuckin' kidding me?"

"What was I supposed to do?"

"Not put your life on the line for a piece of land I don't give a fuck about!"

"I didn't know that!"

"But you want me to give the land to Rayland!"

"Because he's your family!"

"You're my family, not him! Jesus Christ, Stef, you could've been killed, and what the fuck does that do for me, huh? That fucks me for the rest of my life 'cause I get to be without you, you selfish son of a bitch!"

"I was thinking of you!"

"If you were thinkin' about me, you would have never gotten on the horse!"

"Rand—"

"And Everett and Dusty and Chase and—"

"Rand—"

"They're all fired, Stef. Do you understand how fired they are?"

No. "Rand, you can't do that!"

"Oh no? Fuckin' watch me! How dare they let you get up on that—"

"Stop yelling!" I yelled at him, which was funny, but not at the moment because I was livid. "You don't get to fire men from my ranch because you're pissed. They all came with me, they've been here for me, and yeah they didn't want me to ride the crazy horse, but I did it for you and for the ranch, and yeah I got hurt, but so the fuck what? And Rayland should have the land because he didn't take it. We give it on our terms because we want to, not because he's a conniving piece of crap who got one over on us. The guys and me, we did this, Rand. We told him and all the rest of the homophobic assholes around here to go fuck themselves. And Gil Landry and his sister, who thinks that you'll get over me, can go screw themselves, too, 'cause you will never be over me."

It was quiet on the other end.

"Are you done?"

"Yeah, I'm done."

"Stay there and wait for me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand." I sucked in my breath suddenly, shivering with a cramp in my leg, the pain of it and from being outside in the cold.

"You should get off your leg."

"Yes, I should," I agreed.

"Did you even for a second think about the worst thing that would happen when you got up on the horse?"

"No, I only wanted to protect you."

"Where are you now?"

"Now I'm looking at my trailer and Bella in the window."

"You took your dog?"

"Why does everybody keep saying that like it's weird? Yeah, I like my dog. So what?"

His laughter sounded so good.

"Rand—"

"You're right."

"About what?"

"That I won't be gettin' over you."

"Oh yeah?" I sighed.

"Yeah. I do better when you're around."

It was suddenly hard to breathe.

"So I can stay in this trailer until tomorrow? They're not going to come throw me out of it after the guys go?"

"The guys ain't goin' nowhere neither. Everyone waits there for me. You tell them."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Okay. If Rayland and Glenn stay here, will you talk to them about the grazing rights?"

"I will invite them to the Red, Stef, that's it."

Which was better than nothing. "Thank you, Rand."

"Don't fall asleep."

"I won't."

"Did the doctor give you something for the pain?"

"Yes."

"I don't want you to take something that's gonna knock you out."

"I'll be all right."

"You keep saying that, and you keep getting hurt."

"Hurry up," I grumbled at him playfully.

"I am!"

I really couldn't wait to see him.

Chapter 8

I went to the trailer, let Bella out, and decided to walk back to where the dancing was and explain things to Glenn. Everett was there before I got far, bringing me my crutch.

"The beauty queen asked me to bring this to you."

"Who?"

"Carly Landry."

"Oh, that's right." I forced a smile.

"You look like you been rode hard and put up wet."

"That sounds disgusting," I told him. "I'm heading back to the grounds; do me a favor and find Glenn Holloway and ask him to come see me."

He nodded and I watched his eyes fall as he shoved his hands down into his pockets. I knew I was looking at guilt.

"You told Rand where I was, asshole."

"I told Pierce to let him know. Yessir, I did."

"And when he was on the site watching me keep the bull off of Glenn, he watched me get thrown off the bronco."

His eyes met mine. "So I suspect that he's on his way."

I nodded.

"Am I fired?"

"No, don't be an idiot."

He looked surprised. "Really? He ain't mad?"

"Oh, he's furious, but not at any of you guys, just at me."

"Really?"

"Yeah, don't sound so happy about it."

"I ain't happy. I'm just surprised is all. I expected him to be plenty mad."

"He'll be here tomorrow."

"Well then I expect we'll be here to see him. We weren't planning to leave until about noon tomorrow anyhow."

"Rayland and Glenn are leaving earlier than that, so that's why I need to talk to Glenn," I said, getting both crutches under me, ready to trudge back to the main grounds. "You really think Carly's a beauty queen?"

"I think she's a stuck-up bitch who won't give me the time of day now when she knows I'm just a cowboy, but if I won the lottery tomorrow, I might just look a bit better."

I smiled at him. "If you would just talk to Regina Kincaid instead of walking by her every time you see her, then your life might actually get around to starting, Everett."

He looked like I'd slapped him. "Her brother and her father hate me."

"They don't hate you. They think you only wanna get laid, and that's not the man they're looking for to be the husband of the angel of their family."

He cleared his throat. "Her father said, and I quote, that he didn't want a white man in his family."

I grunted. "I was there when he said it, and his exact quote was that he didn't want a white man that didn't attend church regular in his family. That's what he said."

Everett's eyes were on me.

"You're not a bad man. In fact you're a very good one, but you have ways that need to be changed if you want a woman like that. She teaches school, she goes to church, and she is stunning. I have never seen such big brown eyes and a beautiful smile and her skin is just—"

He made a noise so I'd stop.

"But you're a dog, and she's better than that, like way better."

"She's out of my league."

"Not if you really wanted her," I told him. "But you would have to want her more than the life you have now, and only you can say if you do or not."

He nodded.

"So, are we ready to go?"

"No," he sighed, and I could tell his brain was spinning before his eyes were suddenly back on mine with a look I had never seen before.

"God, what?"

"On the best ranches I've ever been on, the men were more like family. Most times those ranches don't last. They get bought up by large cattle companies, or they go under for some other reason, but the Red Diamond is a big ranch that acts like a small one, and I understand after this weekend that the reason it stays that way is 'cause of you."

I squinted at him.

He took off his hat, fiddled with it in his hands.

"I don't mean to sound ignorant, and I ain't sayin' you're a woman, but with us, with the men, your regard is softer than Rand Holloway's, and I suspect that's why you balance him out."

It was the nicest thing he'd ever said to me. "I appreciate that, but it was how it was before I came along. You gotta know the ranch is Rand and vice versa."

"No, sir." He shook his head. "Before you came, it was a fine place to work, but we weren't no family."

The feeling hit me, surged over and through me, my jaw clenched, and my eyes burned as I shivered to keep from falling apart. His words meant more than he could have known because it meant that maybe, just maybe, I was as good for Rand Holloway as he was for me.

"Things have changed since you came."

For everyone it seemed, not just me.

"Rand seems settled now that you're on the ranch, and I might want to know things about that."

He looked uncomfortable, his hat doing circles now in his restless hands. I would give him his out. "You mean you wanna try being settled, right, not sleeping with a man?"

I braced for it, and he smacked my arm really hard.

"Shit, Everett!"

"Well I can't hit your head or I might kill ya, and I can't kick ya in the leg neither. Man, you are an annoying piece of crap!"

Like I had never been told that before. "Do me a favor and go get Glenn Holloway for me, willya? There's no way I can make that walk back. I'm ready to pass out now."

"Well, then, go to bed."

"Rand said I couldn't, something about the concuss—"

"Oh shit, that's right," he said, turning to leave. "I'll go fetch Glenn and be back to watch ya. Just stay here."

"You don't have to tell me twice," I teased him. "Hey, who fed Bella today?"

"I did."

"Thank you for remembering."

"Remember?" He looked at me oddly. "Who can forget? Your dog's just as annoying as you are."

I smiled at him as he started walking away and noticed how he turned and called Bella to him to take the walk.

She looked up at me.

"Go get him, Bell, get him," I said playfully.

Her head tilted to the side like I was an idiot as she sat down beside me.

"It ain't no use, Stef." I heard him laugh. "That dog loves you best."

As I ran my hand over her muzzle and she bumped my fingers, her tail beating hard in the dirt, I had to smile. She certainly did.

I went inside and got my parka and my beanie because it was colder outside than the two nights before. I was sitting on the bottom step of the trailer, throwing a tennis ball for my dog when she stopped suddenly, froze, her dirty, fuzzy, green quarry between her paws.

"Stef?"

I waved at Glenn. "Sorry to call you out here, but I'm done walking for one night."

He hesitated, stopping where he was, eyeing my dog.

"She won't hurt you."

"She's fuckin' huge, Stef."

I called her to me, and she moved fast, stopping in front of me so that I could touch one of her silky ears.

Glenn walked slowly, carefully, his eyes never leaving her.

"You rode a bull today," I reminded him. "Cowboy up."

"Yeah, well the bull won't go for my jugular."

"She's harmless."

"Says you."

"Throw the ball for her."

He picked it up, showed it to her, and threw it.

"I think she squinted at me," he told me when she didn't move a muscle.

I started laughing, and she moved and shoved her nose in my eye before she nuzzled my hair and smelled me.

Glenn chuckled. "She thinks you're her pup."

"Possibly." I smiled, petting my dog. "Get the ball, Bell, go get it." She eyed Glenn instead.

He knelt down and she moved slowly, checking him out. After she allowed him to pet her, she was suddenly off like a shot to get the ball.

"Damn, that is one careful dog."

"Hey, listen, it turns out I can't go home with you guys tomorrow, but if you could wait until Rand shows up tomorrow, I—"

"Rand's gonna be here tomorrow?"

"Yeah, and if you could, Glenn, I'd love it if you actually came home with us. I'd like you to talk to Rand about your restaurant idea."

His mouth was open, but no words came out. When Bella dropped the disgusting slobber- and dirt-covered tennis ball at his feet, he picked it up without thinking and threw it for her.

"Did you hear me?"

"I did."

"And?"

"Rand hates me."

I shook my head. "No."

"No?"

"You should come back out to the Red. Ask your father if he will too."

"My father?" He was stunned.

"Please."

"God, Stef, are you sure?"

"Positive."

"You want us to wait for Rand?"

"If you can."

"I can. I don't know if my father will."

Oh, he will, I thought. "Just ask him, okay?"

He cleared his throat. "Sure."

"I need to sleep," I told him, realizing that I didn't even think I could crawl to bed. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He was really looking at me. "You know, you're kind of pale. Do you need help inside?"

"No."

"Stef, you should let—"

"I'm good," I lied. "You go enjoy what's left of your night."

He nodded. "Okay then, we'll look for Rand in the morning."

"Great."

"They're gonna serve breakfast tomorrow before everyone goes. You should come up there and sit with us if you can."

"If I can even move in the morning, I'll be there."

His brows furrowed. "You sure you don't need me to stay?"

"No, and besides, you gotta get back to Rachel." I smiled at him. "You know, it feels like it's three in the morning, but it's probably like ten."

"Ten thirty," he corrected me.

"See?" I shrugged. "Getting thrown off a horse really screws up your sense of time."

"It's going to the hospital that does it."

I shrugged and we laughed like we were war buddies before he left me tossing the ball for my dog. It was all the movement I could manage.

Chapter 9

In MY sunglasses and cowboy hat, I was sure that I must have looked hung over instead of in the pain that I was in. But I arrived, more sore that morning than I had been the previous day, but decidedly more clear-headed. I was going to try and stick to Tylenol and nothing stronger if I could manage it. Everything else made me loopy and way too chatty.

I was surprised to see Carly Landry there at one of the tables sitting with her brother. I took a seat while Everett went to get me a plate.

"Stefan."

I looked up and she was there, hovering over me.

"It's good to see you this morning."

I waited for whatever it was she wanted.

"May I sit?"

"Sure."

"Glenn was looking for you earlier."

Which was good, and I was going to say something to that effect when I turned to her, only to find that she was not looking at me at all. She was completely absorbed with something else. Her lips were parted, her eyes were wide, and her hands fisted on the table. I scanned the crowd, trying to find what had her so transfixed.

Rand.

I was stunned. There, cutting his way through people was Rand Holloway. He just walked in a straight line, and everyone moved out of his way. He was wearing his gray Stetson, flannel shirt, jeans, and boots, and somehow, on him, it was breathtaking. From Carly's reaction, I was not the only one who thought so.

Rand's stride was all his own. There was fluidity to it, a rise and fall, and he walked with a confidence that no one else I knew had, an absolute knowledge of his place in the world. The effortless display of his strength, power, and masculinity brought my heart up into my throat.

"Rand is here," Carly announced unnecessarily, and as she rose and waved, he noticed her, and when he saw her, he saw me.

I smiled as his eyes narrowed as he reached me.

"Rand," Carly said breathlessly, "I'm so glad to—"

"Stef." His voice cracked as his hands went to my face and he bent toward me.

"Don't," I cautioned him, turning fast, kissing his palm before I leaned back. "How are you?"

The muscles in his jaw corded, but he swallowed everything down. I saw the effort it took, and watched as he picked up the chair beside me and turned it before he sat down. He was facing me, his knees on both sides of mine, and his hands went to my thighs, holding them. I took a deep breath as a surge of feeling tore through me. I was hurt and I had held myself together because I had to. But he was there and I could lean on him, and I had never, ever, been so happy to see him. His warm hand found its way back to my cheek.

"You shouldn't touch me."

"I don't give a damn what anyone thinks, Stef. I love you and that's all there is."

Looking at him, into the electric blue eyes I loved, I felt better. "Thank you for coming."

"I came as fast as I could," he told me, his voice low and deep, very husky, very sexy.

I nodded as he leaned back and lifted my broken leg up into his lap.

"You're supposed to keep this elevated," he told me as Everett joined us.

"Hey, boss," he greeted Rand warily.

"That looks good," Rand told him, eyeing the eggs and biscuits and gravy that Everett had brought for me. "Bring me one, Ev, and tell Chris and Pierce that Stef and I need coffee and orange juice."

Everett didn't move, just stared at Rand, waiting.

"Did I stutter?"

"No, sir." His smile came suddenly, and it was bright. "Thank you."

"No, thank you," Rand told him, and touched the brim of his hat.

Everett let out a deep breath and then left.

I watched him go, and in the process of turning back to Rand, I found Carly. I had completely forgotten that she was there. She did not look like the same person. There was so much that she was showing me: pain, humiliation, hatred, and longing. Most of all there was that, the longing.

"Rand."

He turned slowly from his examination of my leg and his eyes flicked to hers.

"It's nice to see you."

He nodded. "And you. You look good."

"Thank you."

"How are your folks?" he asked, making conversation as his fingers dug into my thigh, massaging the knotted muscles there, cramped from walking oddly yesterday.

"They're well."

"Good, please give them my best."

"I will."

His eyes flicked back to my face. "Could you take those off for me?" I really didn't want to.

"Stef," his voice rumbled, my name sounding decadent.

I took the oversized sunglasses off and put them on the top of my head, pushing my hair out of my face.

He studied me for long minutes, and I saw the muscles clenching in his jaw.

"Rand," I said softly, coaxing, trying to soothe the hurt and anger I found in his eyes.

"I need to have a word with Gil."

"No," Carly and I said together.

"Have you looked at your eye?" Rand asked me through gritted teeth before he tenderly lifted my leg off his thigh, stood, and gently lowered it onto the chair.

"But Rand," Carly began. "Gil was only—"

"He hit Stef and Stef belongs to me," he said so calmly that for a second I missed that the man was furious as he started away from the table.

"Rand!" she called after him.

He increased his stride to reach her brother. Nothing anyone said, even me, was going to stop him. And I understood. No one was allowed to hurt the people who Rand Holloway loved.

"Gil!" he barked out.

I saw the man in question rise up out of the chair he was in. He looked terrified, which prompted my next yell for Everett. I was actually much relieved to see Glenn and Rayland walking toward us with some others.

"Glenn!"

He heard me, saw Rand, and bolted toward him. Unfortunately, he wasn't quite fast enough. As my boyfriend reached the table, Gil threw a roundhouse punch at him that missed him by a mile. What did that say about my fighting prowess that he had landed a punch on me so easily? And it wasn't like I didn't know how to defend myself, but the blow Rand returned was leagues beyond anything I had in my arsenal. It was dead on, full of power, catching Gil squarely in the face. I heard the pop even from where I was, saw the gush of blood, and realized that it had taken only seconds for Rand to break the man's nose.

"Goddamnit, Holloway!" Gil yelled as Glenn and Everett grabbed Rand, pulling him back.

"Fuck you. It should've been your jaw, you stupid piece of shit!"

Gil put his head back as several of his men shoved napkins at him to stem the flow of blood.

"This is all your fault."

I looked over at Carly and saw how angry and hurt she was.

"Do you think he's going to thank you for this a year from now, five years from now when he has no children and no friends? He'll have no one to have over to his home, no other parents to spend weekends with, no friends to go to the movies with or double-date with because he won't have a wife, he'll just have you."

The venom and hatred in her voice was scathing.

"That man was made to be a father, made to be a friend, and you're robbing him of all of it, all he could be, you selfish piece of shit!"

It was, as usual, about more than me. I was a catalyst lately, and that was okay. Instead of making her own life, she had been banking on a man to give it to her. Unlike most of the women I knew who made their happily ever after themselves and then found someone to share their dream with them, Carly was waiting for the guy on a white horse. I wish she had asked me; I would have told her that if she built her castle, someone would want to live in it with her. But she had to put it up first.

"You're taking away the home he could have! You're taking away everything!"

"Carly," I said quietly.

"I—"

"Just stop," I cut her off, "because what you don't know about Rand Holloway is a lot."

She sucked in her breath as she glared at me with wet, red-rimmed eyes.

"I don't know what kind of ranch you live on, Carly, but on the Red Diamond, Rand doesn't have time to see a movie or spend time with friends," I soothed her. "The man takes Sunday off mostly, and on that day everyone who lives on our ranch makes a trip up to the house, and we all have dinner, all the families, all the wives and kids. Everyone brings something, and in the summer we barbeque, and in the winter it's more stew and pot roast and things like that. Rand's friends normally see him on Saturday night after he's worked all day. He's been known to meet them to play cards or visit a bar to watch a game."

The tears were flowing, but she was listening.

"Yes, he's lost some friends because he chose me, but he's also got some new ones."

She took the napkin I passed her.

"And his family is the same because they all love me, and the ranch is thriving like crazy." I smiled at her, reaching for her hand. "Rand Holloway doesn't need a wife. He just needs to love and be loved in return."

The trembling she was doing turned fast to shaking. "It's filthy and you're sick, and if you think he really loves you, you're dead wrong. How could he?"

There would be no breakthrough, no epiphany, and I was so sad for her that I squinted so I wouldn't cry. I really was a bit more exhausted than I was giving myself credit for being.

"Okay," I breathed.

"When he throws you out on your—"

"Hey."

Looking up as Rand joined us, I noticed how huge the man's smile was. The brilliant turquoise eyes were brimming with warmth and happiness, just dancing.

I was captivated.

"Did ya see me?" He waggled his eyebrows.

I shook my head, and the smile became absolutely evil. He was very happy with himself.

"We don't go around hitting people," I scolded him.

"Well then, maybe people shouldn't go around hittin' people that other people think hang the moon." He cocked an eyebrow at me.

I stared up into mischievous blue eyes and realized that the way the man was looking at me, there could be no mistake about what I was to him.

Carly sucked in her breath.

He stood there staring down at me with possessiveness, heat, and plain old joy.

"Invite Glenn and Rayland home with us."

"I did already," he told me, reclaiming his seat beside me, lifting my broken leg back into his lap as Everett put a plate down in front of him. "They'll be right behind us when we leave, and Zach'll meet us there too." Chris was there a second later with a small Ziploc bag full of ice. "Here boss, for the hand."

"Thank you," he said, eating with his left hand as he iced the knuckles of his right. Dusty brought his coffee and orange juice.

"Man, I am starving," he said, smiling around the table at his men as they all took seats, having moved from where they were sitting before to be close. "Hey, Ev, I saw the bull riding, not too bad."

"You would've won," he answered Rand.

"Yes, sir, I would've," he teased him. "But I don't suspect that Stef'll want me to ride the bull anymore, so we'll have to make sure you win next year."

"Yessir," Everett agreed.

Rand turned to Chris and then Dusty and complimented each of his men in turn. And I watched Carly listen and take in the scene in front of her, lingering, hovering there to see the men vie for the attention of the man who was their world. Because without Rand, there was no ranch, and without the ranch, they had no home. He was the nexus of everything, and the longer she stood there, the more she understood. The man was the same, and I was an extension of him to them. That I was a man made no difference.

Her concerns, the prejudice she was speaking of might have mattered if Rand were dependent for his livelihood on one place or if he did business in only his town or the next, but he had been smart when he decided to grow his father's ranch, and made sure he explored all his marketing options far and wide. And whether people knew it or not, Rand was a shrewd and disciplined businessman. He had good instincts, and he understood people, and lately, since he had a partner who knew acquisitions, he had become downright deadly in financial matters. There was nothing the man was missing except children. And he even had a plan for that with the help of his little sister, who was also my—

"Oh, shit." I jolted, remembering that I was supposed to call Charlotte.

Rand turned to look at me. "Did you just remember that Char's goin' to the doctor this Wednesday?"

"Yeah," I breathed, staring at him.

"Well, she called me when she couldn't get a hold of you, and I told her what you were up to, so she's comin' for a visit this weekend, and we can talk about things."

"Oh, God," I groaned. "Maybe I'll sleep in the bunkhouse, and you can tell her I ran away to join the circus."

He smiled at me. "She'll find you wherever you go 'cause she loves you probably more than her husband or her mama or me."

I loved her just as much.

His smile was lazy and wicked. "She was fit to be tied."

"Crap."

"Maybe you best get her some jewelry," he offered, "or a car."

I nodded as he cackled.

"Rand."

He looked up at Carly.

"I hope you're happy."

"I am, thank you, and I wish the same for you."

She nodded fast before she turned and walked away.

"You take care now," he called after her before turning back to me. "I think when I explain things to Char, I'm gonna be in the same doghouse as you."

"Nope, death trumps secrets."

He brushed my hair back out of my face and looked at me before his brows furrowed.

"It's just a black eye. You should have been more worried about me on the bronco."

"You decided to ride the horse, Stef. That was your choice. You didn't choose to get hit."

"I—"

"Rand, you fuck!"

My cowboy turned his head and gave a sputtering, fuming, red-faced, pissed-off Gil Landry his attention.

"I'm gonna call the sheriff and—"

"You won't do shit, Gil," he yelled over to the other man. "You hit Stef first, and I already stopped in town and saw Austin before I came out here. He told me to have you give him a call if you felt the urge to talk to him."

Gil was stunned.

"You know the sheriff here?" I asked Rand.

"Of course. We used to go fishing together when we was young. Now we hunt every winter. You met him before, Austin Cross. He has those speckled hunting dogs."

"Oh." I did remember.

"He looks flabbergasted," Everett said.

I turned to look at him. "What?"

"I don't have much call to use that word, and so... Gil Landry looked flabbergasted."

"That's a good word," Dusty agreed. "I like splendid. I don't think splendid is used enough."

Everett nodded. "How 'bout, the boss threw a splendid punch."

"Yes." Dusty nodded. "It was splendid."

I rolled my eyes as Rand started to chuckle while he ate.

"None of y'all is right in the head," Pierce muttered under his breath.

It was hard to argue with him.

After breakfast, Rand started ordering everyone around, and they moved fast since they were used to it, and then he and I went together to talk to the rodeo coordinators. Hud Lawrence was thrilled to see Rand, and Rand shook Katie Beal's hand for being the one to call and let us know about the rodeo in the first place. I watched her stare up at him in awe, and I got it. If you had an idea in your mind of what a cowboy was supposed to look like, with the hat and the Wranglers, the jet-black hair, and the killer blue eyes, Rand Holloway embodied that ideal. The look she gave me, like *good job landing that one*, was adorable. It never ceased to be interesting, the acceptance of my lifestyle from some people, the anger from others. I myself had never cared who anyone slept with, and it still amazed me that some people did.

As Rand helped me back toward the trailer, his strong arm wrapped around my waist, I felt more like me than I had in days. And I got it. When I was with Rand, the tender, loving man he brought out in me was who I really was. I was still selfish, still opinionated and quick to get a rise out of, but with him, I was better. He brought out the best in me. What more could I ask for?

Chapter 10

Getting home was indescribable. Rand put me on the couch to rest since I had fallen asleep in the truck on the ride home. I had no idea why it was that going someplace always took longer than getting back.

"We stopped a lot more times than you did," I told Rand.

"I'm sure you did."

"I was thinking I should cancel class tomorrow," I told him as Tyler came in the back door and yelled for Rand.

"I think that would be best." He smiled down at me, brushing my hair back from my face, the look in his eyes still the same as it had been for the entire ride home.

"I'm fine," I told him. "You want me to get up and make you dinner just so you can see?"

He shook his head before he leaned over and kissed my forehead.

"Rand!"

"What?" he snarled at Tyler, which was funny because he had been so tender only seconds before.

"Your mama called to say that she'll be here tomorrow, and Everett called to tell me that Rayland and Glenn are comin' for a visit as well—what the hell is goin' on?"

"I have things to discuss with everyone, even you, old man, and Stef here is fixin' to butt into your life as well."

Tyler turned to look at me. "What are you gonna do there, Stef?"

"I had no idea you had children," I told him.

He squinted at me. "And so you're thinkin' to do what with that information?"

"Invite them to the ranch, of course."

"They won't come."

I grinned slowly. "Oh, no?"

He rolled his eyes, and Rand chuckled above me.

"Stef is irresistible, you know that."

"I—"

"There's Glenn and Rayland," Rand interrupted him as lights illuminated the front windows.

I realized how much I wanted to close my eyes.

"Come on," Rand said, bending to scoop me up into his arms.

"What're you doing?"

"We're gonna all rest tonight. I don't feel like talkin' to everyone while we're all tired and short-tempered. I'll talk to Rayland and Glenn some, and then turn in."

I opened my mouth to interrupt him.

"Yes, I know, put out extra towels, washcloths, and the water pitcher with the glass that fits in the top that we use for company."

"Okay," I sighed, rubbing my eyes hard with the heels of my hands.

"Stop. Just close 'em."

"I missed you. I wanna see you."

"You can see me in the morning," he said as he picked me up and pressed me against his chest.

Leaning my head into his shoulder, I kissed the line of his jaw. "You don't have to take care of me. I'm not your wife."

"Where the hell did that come from?"

Instead of answering, I nuzzled my face under the collar of his shirt, inhaling his musty scent, licked salt from his skin, tasting him before I opened my mouth and bit down gently.

"What're you doing?" he groaned, steadying himself on the stairs.

"I'm not weak. I can take care of myself and you if you let me."

"I know what you can do, Stef," he whispered, looking down into my eyes. "But just lemme take care of you, just this once."

The way he breathed in, the squint of his eyes, the press of his lips together, the cording of the muscles in his jaw, all of it together told me that I had scared him perhaps more than I knew.

"I want a hot shower, and then I want to get into bed with you."

"Will you let me help you?"

"I'm counting on it."

The shudder filtered through his strong solid frame, and I felt like I could breathe for the first time in days.

Watching Rand made my heart hurt. He was so gentle, talking to me, gentling me like he did the horses, keeping up a running monologue as he explained about wrapping my leg in a garbage bag so I could shower.

Normally I would have tried very hard to seduce him. As he bent to wrap my leg in plastic, had I been a hundred percent, I would have shoved my groin into his face without invitation. As it was, the process of getting me into the shower and then back out exhausted me. I had existed on maybe three hours of sleep a night, and between that and my injury, I was ready to pass out.

Rand towel-dried my hair and then shoved me down on the bed. He had put me in a pair of sleep shorts and nothing else and so swaddled me under the down comforter and tucked it over my shoulders and under my chin. He kissed my forehead and told me he'd be back with water. I muttered my agreement, and my eyes fluttered closed.

When I woke up several hours later, starving, I found Rand beside me, sitting there reading a book. First, he kissed me, which was amazing all by itself, and then he brought me food and made me take more drugs. Granted, it was only Tylenol, but since I had never been one for anything harder than alcohol, it was enough to keep whatever residual pain I had away. The roast beef sandwich was good, and sometimes plain potato chips are like a gift from heaven. The sun tea along with it, and I felt like a whole new person. Once Rand was back, I thanked him and asked if he would be able to read with me wrapped around him. He just patted his chest.

"Thank you for taking care of me," I said as I put my head on his chest, my hurt leg between his two good ones, and shoved my groin into his

thigh.

He nuzzled my hair, and then when I tipped my head up, he kissed my nose. "I wish I had been there the whole time. Please, Stef, please don't ever leave without telling me where you're going again. I really need to know where exactly you're at when you ain't with me."

I nodded and pressed a kiss to the underside of his jaw.

He kissed my hair, inhaling me at the same time, and I could feel the tiny tremble snaking through the man's big body.

"I'm okay."

There was only a nod against my head. He loved me very much, and when I tilted my head back again to speak to him, he bent and kissed me.

His kiss was possessive, telling me without words who I belonged to. His hands were on my face as he moved my head so he could kiss my chin, jaw, and throat. It was wet and hot, and I whimpered as I rubbed my hardening cock against his thigh.

"What do you need?"

He reached down and gripped me through the thin cotton of the sleep shorts, and I made the garbled noise in the back of my throat. It felt so good.

I was rolled onto my back, and he slid the shorts down so that my now leaking cock bobbed free. He bent my knees as he slid down between my legs, hands on the back of my thighs as he leaned over me and took my hardness down the back of his throat.

"Fuck, Rand." I arched up into him, gasping, my back bowing off the bed.

The man's mouth was so hot and wet, and he sucked all of me, and I could feel the muscles in his throat contracting. I had gone days without him, and my body knew what it wanted, what it had to have.

"Oh God, Rand, please turn me over and fuck me. I need hard. I want hard."

I was flipped gently to my stomach, and I lifted up on hands and knees, trembling with anticipation.

His hand went to the back of my head and he buried my face in the comforter at the same time there was the cool smear of lube on my entrance.

My whimper was loud as I felt the head of his enormous cock prod me.

There would be no foreplay, no preparation, no slow slide of fingers pushing into me, scissoring and stretching. There would be nothing but all of Rand's long, thick, erection thrusting deep inside me.

"Hurry," I begged him, even though it was muffled.

He plunged into me, and I howled with pleasure and release and need. No one would have ever believed that a man in pain, exhausted and bruised, would want to be fucked so hard he cried out. But to simply submit, to give up and let my body be ravaged so my mind could rest, to so trust another person that you gave them every little part of your soul, that was what I had to have. I took Rand Holloway into my body, my heart. There was nothing he didn't have, no part that was left unclaimed.

"Please," I cried and felt the tears flooding my eyes, rolling down my cheeks. "Oh, Rand, don't ever leave me."

He pounded into me, and the lovemaking became a blur of kissing and biting and licking and sucking and always, always, the deep, hard, thrusting that made my world a rhythm of heat until I screamed out that I was going to come. His fingers, wrapped around my dripping cock, brought me to a shuddering release, and I closed my eyes so tight there was only black for long minutes before I was aware of hot cum filling my ass and running down the backs of my thighs.

We stayed together, locked, my muscles rippling around him, his cock throbbing inside me, both of us trembling and heaving for breath.

"Rand?"

"You're the only one who makes me lose my fuckin' mind."

"I love you," I panted as his lips closed on the back of my neck, sucking hard.

"And I love you back," he growled, licking the sweat off my shoulder before he eased slowly, gently from my still-clenching channel.

He collapsed on the bed beside me, and I dropped down on top of him, curling my smaller frame around his massive one as he tucked my head onto his shoulder. "Jesus, Stef, I love you more than anything. I will never, ever, let you leave me, and you gotta never think that's gonna change. We're gonna fight, but there will not come a time when I want you anywhere but at my side. You hear me?"

I nodded.

"Say it."

I smiled into the hollow of his throat. "Rand Holloway loves me."

"Yes, I do." He hugged me tight. "You're my whole life."

I fell asleep naked and sticky, wrapped in the strong arms of the man I loved. There was no better thing in the world.

Chapter 11

He was surprised. Whatever Rayland Holloway had expected on the Red Diamond was not what he found. Breakfast had surprised him. I cooked, Rand made coffee, Tyler joined us, and so did all the unmarried men. The married men rode in from their houses that were built on Rand's land far enough away to give them privacy. In the two years I had been there, Rand added Tyler's house, and Mac's, since he was foreman, and Tom's, who had come to Rand with a family, and his cousin Chase's as well. Chase had met a woman in Winston, and because he and his wife were an interracial couple, it had been hard to find an apartment in town. So Rand had built them a house. All married men, he said, got houses. I thought Everett's might be next if he ever got his act together.

But Tom and Chase rode in, and they, too, greeted Rayland and Glenn when they reached the house. Everyone checked on me, winced at the eye, surveyed the cast on my leg, and said in various ways that they were glad I was okay.

"Can't have nothin' happen to you, Stef." Tom grinned at me. "I like my boss the way he is now. I ain't ready to have him back how he was."

Tyler had taken his brother and Glenn all over the ranch that morning, and Rand had shown him the website and the orders that came through at all hours, and showed them by webcam the efficient office in Dallas that handled Rand's business, introduced them to his sales manager, June Thomas, his accountant, and the other ten people who made certain that no one ever had to wait to buy beef from the Red Diamond.

"Congratulations again on the Grillmaster account, Rand." June smiled at him.

She was a very attractive woman who a lot of men made the mistake of thinking was only a pretty face and not a scary-smart financial shark. Her smile was predatory.

"Thank you."

"We look forward to doing much more business with you."

"Which is appreciated," he assured her.

"Give Stefan my regards," she told him since she couldn't see me across the room.

"Yes, ma'am." He smiled at her because he appreciated that, too, that she included me as she did every other wife and every other husband of the people she did business with. I was Rand's partner; it was polite to hope I was doing well. In her mind, there was no difference, and my cowboy liked that about her so much.

Rand had to survey his ranch as he did every day, and Glenn and Rayland had ridden out to watch him, see the operation up close, and get a feel for the land. I checked my email and got a nice message back from my boss at the college. She told me to of course take the day, take Tuesday, and rest, and if I needed Wednesday as well, to simply let her know. I messaged her back that I would be in the next morning, but that I appreciated her concern. By the time lunch rolled around, I could tell from seeing the looks on Rayland's and Glenn's faces that the two men were overwhelmed with being on the Red Diamond. When Zach showed up, I watched them interact from the porch.

Zach was as tall and handsome as the rest of the Holloway men, but where the others had blue eyes, his were a lovely golden brown. From the little I could overhear, he was pissed that Glenn had used his need of Rand for selfish purposes. There was yelling and shoving, and Rand and Rayland had to break the brothers up. I was going to walk over to the fence when the profanity started flying, but Tyler showed up with May, and so I let them handle it instead, staying where I was, stretched out on one of the Adirondack chairs, my feet on the coffee table. I would have never done it inside the house, but on the porch it seemed perfectly acceptable.

"Everybody come on up here. I have something to say."

I sat up from my slouch as they all came clomping up the front steps, cowboy boots making a lot of noise, as Rand led them to me. He stepped

around in back of me, hands on my shoulders.

"Oh my God," May gasped, crossing to me, sitting down on the loveseat, grabbing my hand. "Sweetheart, what in the world happened to your eye?"

"Mom," Rand said, and her eyes lifted from me to him. "Wait a sec, okay? Uhm, Zach, this here is Stef. Stef, Zach."

He was really the worst at introductions. He just basically said everyone's name, and that was it. "Nice to meet you." I smiled.

Zach seemed very interested in me from the way he was studying my face. "Same here."

"Okay so." Rand squeezed my shoulders. "Mom."

Oh no.

"Wait." I turned my head to look up at him.

"I know Rayland's my biological father. Dad told me when I turned eighteen. I'm real sorry I never told you, but I was mad for a piece, and then by the time I worked through that, I just didn't have the heart to bring it up. Forgive me."

I turned to look at May.

Silence.

She just sat there, speechless, with her mouth open. As I checked everyone, I saw that Rayland had turned to stone, Tyler was holding on to the porch railing, Zach looked like a deer caught in the headlights, and Glenn, I was pretty sure, was going to be sick.

"That was fuckin' brilliant," I said, turning in my seat to look up at the man I loved.

He shrugged, shoving his hands down into the pockets of his jeans. "I ain't much for grandstandin', you know that. Sometimes the best thing is to just spit things out."

I knew that. "Yeah, but Jesus Christ, Rand."

And then all hell broke loose.

"You knew?" May screeched at her son.

"Your son?" Glenn roared at Rayland.

"Jesus," Zach breathed out, and the look on his face was hard to distinguish.

"You knew?" May's voice was increasing in decibel level.

"Your father?" Tyler barked at Rand.

I got up because I didn't want to sit there, and I needed to talk to my best friend. I missed Charlotte. Walking into the house, I grabbed my cell phone off the coffee table in the living room and called her. And because it was her, and because I had permission from Rand, which I had gotten that morning before we went down for breakfast, I broke the news to her about her brother.

"I know," she sighed.

My turn to be shocked. "What?"

"Yeah, Daddy told me when I turned eighteen. He wanted me to know, and if Rand ever told me, or didn't, he still wanted me to know."

"And?"

"And what? Rand Holloway and I have the same mom, and we grew up with the same dad, and so that makes us brother and sister. No one is ever taking him away from me, and even when I've wanted to kill him, I still claimed him as mine."

Of course the news had changed nothing for Charlotte.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

"Oh, Char, that was not your secret to share."

"I should talk to him. Maybe I'll come early before the weekend and see you both."

I grunted.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"I saw the video, you know. I will smack you when I get there."

"Somebody already did."

"What does that mean?"

When I told her about Gil Landry and his sister and Glenn and how her cousin wanted to open a restaurant, she had me go back to where Gil hit me. "I'll kill him!"

She was feisty, so she would try. "Rand already broke his nose."

"Oh, awesome. Put him on the phone!"

But when I went outside, I saw that Rand was no longer on the porch. When I looked, I saw him down by the large corral, leaning on the fence, and both Tyler and Rayland were with him. Rand had his arms crossed on the second rail down, forehead pressed to the wood. Rayland was standing close, closer than I'd ever seen them, and I could tell he was doing the talking.

"How about talking to your mom?" I offered Charlotte.

"Good," she said softly, and I could tell that the emoting of the moment was finally catching up to her.

When I offered May my phone and told her who it was, she snatched it from me and retreated into the house. I was left with the same stunned group of people I had left a half an hour before. They were sitting in silence, and I didn't want to intrude. Before I could turn to walk back into the house, there was throat clearing.

I turned to look at Zach.

"Do you think that, uhm, Rand would allow me to stay here with y'all?"

"Sure," I said softly. "But are you sure you'd be comfortable doing that?"

His eyes searched mine. "I think so."

I turned to look at Glenn. "I know that Rand will help set you up in your restaurant if that's what you want to do. He—"

"No," Glenn interrupted, taking a seat beside me, his knee bumping mine as he leaned forward. "My father and I are doing that together. Yesterday on the drive here, he fired me as foreman and told me to go start a restaurant or something."

I smiled at him.

Zach gasped.

"It's so like him."

"It surely is," Zach agreed. "He didn't tell you it was a good idea. He just threw you off his ranch, but he's gonna give you the money to start a

restaurant, the same restaurant you've been talkin' about for the last four years."

"Yep."

"Christ."

"That's how he works."

"It is," Zach agreed. "He really is a son of a bitch."

"You could probably have my job as foreman," Glenn said to his brother.

"Not on a bet," Zach chuckled. "After I sell my ranch, I'm gonna come back here for a spell and work until I figure out what's next. And maybe bein' here will spark somethin'."

"Maybe," Glenn agreed, his voice hoarse as he leaned back, his shoulder against mine.

The three of us were quiet, watching the three men down by the large corral. Tyler was yelling, but I couldn't hear about what over the wind. Rayland was pointing at Rand and then patting his heart as he roared back, and my cowboy looked like he wanted to crawl out of his own skin. I stood up, moved to the porch railing, and yelled for him.

When his head turned, I waved for him, and he started toward me without a word to the other two men.

"What do you need, Stef?" Glenn asked me. "I can help you if you need something."

"Nope, only Rand," I told him as the man reached the porch steps and his eyes were on mine. "Your mother's in the house."

He nodded, but didn't leave, instead crossing to me and stepping close. His hand lifted to the back of my head as he leaned in and pressed his lips to my forehead.

"Everything will be fine," I promised.

He nodded before he left.

"That was nice."

I turned to look at Zach.

"You knew he needed a break, and so you gave him one without him lookin' like he needed it."

Exactly.

He gave me a slight smile.

I walked back over to them, taking my seat beside Glenn. When he turned to look at me, I didn't look away.

"I might be confused about who I want, but not what I want."

"I know," I patted his knee, leaning back, putting my feet up on the table, stretching out my legs.

After a minute, he put his feet on the table beside mine, and after another minute, Zach did too.

"All we need is some beer," Glenn sighed after several long minutes.

"We haven't even had lunch yet," Zach told him.

"We could drink lunch," I suggested.

Everyone agreed that my idea was amazing, but none of us moved. It was quiet out on the porch. The sky was gray, it looked like it might rain, and that crisp fall smell was in the air like a mixture of burning wood, wet earth, pine, and rain.

"This ranch feels like a home, Stef," Zach said after awhile.

"It really does," Glenn agreed, head back, eyes closed.

"Does your arm hurt?" I asked him.

"Some. How 'bout your leg?"

"Some," I teased him.

He smiled, but didn't open his eyes.

"So are you okay about Rand?"

Deep make grunt from him. "Rand Holloway ain't my brother. The only brother I got is sittin' to my right. He'll always be what he is, my cousin I can barely stand... and that's all right."

Zach reached out and patted Glenn's leg, which pulled another grunt from the man.

"I'll come home for a bit after I get the ranch sold, and help you get the restaurant going."

"I appreciate that. Maybe you'll wanna stay and help me, you never know."

"Nope," Zach agreed, leaning back, pulling his hat low across his forehead. "You never do know."

I watched them, sitting there together, Glenn looking like he was asleep, Zach staring out into space, and wondered why they just couldn't say they were sorry for yelling at each other earlier and hug it out. But Zach stating he'd help and Glenn accepting was apparently as good as it got.

Tyler and Rayland walked up toward the house, and both men dropped down onto the sturdy chairs. They looked exhausted.

"So," I said to Tyler.

"You might have told me," he muttered.

"I had no idea until May told me while I was at the rodeo."

"And that there's another thing." Tyler turned on Rayland. "What the hell were you thinkin' lettin' your boy's partner get up on that damn horse? If you knew what Rand was to you and you knew what Stef was to him—what in God's name were ya thinkin'?"

"Like I could stop him!" Rayland pointed at me. "He don't listen to nobody about nothin'. He's just as pigheaded as you and Rand and Glenn and—"

"Just like a Holloway," May said as she stepped out onto the porch.

All eyes were on her, except Glenn who had fallen asleep, as she walked over to me, put a hand through my hair, and passed me my phone.

"Rayland, walk with me."

He got up fast and followed her off the porch and back down toward the large corral. We all watched them, walking side by side, Rayland having crooked his arm for May, and she holding on. I hoped they could find the closure they both needed.

"Hey."

I turned as Rand rejoined the group, taking a seat in the chair beside me, his feet beside mine on the table.

"I had a nice talk with her."

His mother, of course. "Good."

"I spoke to Charlotte on your phone as well."

I nodded. "You look beat."

"I think we all need a drink."

"I was saying that earlier."

He sighed deeply. "So you know, I am not giving those grazing rights in King to Rayland."

"But you said you'd think about it."

"Yeah, well, I thought about it, and it's no. After what he did to try and get them." Rand made a noise in the back of his throat. "And he told me that it was all him. When Glenn came up here, he was actually plannin' on going to Zach's ranch with me, just like I thought. That whole mess with us was just us, me and him, bein' our regular asshole selves to each other."

Beside me, Glenn started to snore softly.

"So he's a dick, but I knew that." Rand almost smiled. "But Rayland is the one who tried to take my land from me, not Glenn."

"He told me he didn't know when I got to the rodeo. I'm not sure if I really believed him since he can be kind of a jerk."

"Because you were thinkin' he was a dick, he made sure to be one."

I nodded. "All you guys do that same thing."

"Yeah, I know it."

"But, Rand, with the grazing rights, you could give them to Rayland. You don't need to graze your cattle there."

"I might," he told me, "depending on how the Red continues to grow, but that ain't the point. He's still treatin' you like you ain't nothin', Stef, and after what you did and the men... I have a choice now that I wasn't gonna have because he decided to go behind my back and stab me. Where's the family in that?"

"I agree," Tyler chimed in, and I looked over at him. "You don't steal from a man and then want a seat at his table."

"Rayland is Rand's father."

"James was his father, and that's why he didn't turn out like Glenn or Zach."

"Screw you, old man," Zach snapped at him.

"You hide what you want." He pointed at Glenn. "You did what you never wanted to do in the first place." He then turned to Zach. "And you're

the same. Both of you made choices because you're afraid of your father."

"And if James were alive, you think Rand would have a man living in his house?"

"Oh, yes," Rand broke into the conversation. "Because I told him."

"What?" I gasped.

His electric blue eyes met mine. "We talked a lot about things, and when I started courting Jenny, told him I was gonna someday marry her, he wasn't sure that was the best idea. When I asked him why not, why marrying Jenny was no good, he said that maybe I should think about asking you to come live with me on the ranch instead, Stef."

I couldn't even breathe.

He sighed deeply. "And I did my best to deny it, and he smiled like he did and said okay. He knew I wasn't ready."

Leaning forward, I reached for him.

"He told me," Rand said and swallowed, sitting up to take my hand in both of his, "that whatever happened, that if I decided on you, Stef, that it was fine with him. He thought the world of you because Charlotte loved you so."

I cleared my throat. "How did he know about you and me? I didn't even know!"

"I suspect since I talked about you all the time that he knew."

"What did you say?"

"It wasn't nice."

"I'm not thinking it was." I smiled at him.

"I complained about you quite a bit, called you every word I could think of. Like I said, it wasn't good."

"And now people call you all those words."

"Which don't bother me half as much as I thought it would. I mean don't get me wrong, I still have trouble thinking of myself as gay. I mean I am gay, but I don't feel no different than I have all my life."

"Because it doesn't change who you are, Rand, just who you sleep with."

"You're still an asshole, gay or straight," Zach assured him.

"Nobody's talkin' to you," Rand groused at him.

"Fine," he grumbled.

Rand looked back at me, and tugged me forward so he could kiss my forehead. "My father knew that if I ever pulled my head outta my ass, that it was gonna be you, Stef, so yeah, you bein' here on the Red—I wish my father was alive to see you living on his ranch."

I closed my eyes, clenched my jaw tight, and fought not to make a sound as I let his words find a place inside me forever.

"And that's the difference between my father," Rand breathed as I opened my eyes. "And yours," he told Zach. "So are you fine bein' here with me and Stef, or not?"

"I'm fine," Zach grumbled. "I ain't got no problem with you and him long as I don't have to watch."

"Like I'd let you," Rand snapped at him, turning back to me, squinting.

"What's wrong?"

"You need to lie down. You look exhausted."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not," he told me. "Get up."

I rose and he put an arm around my waist as I slid mine around his shoulders.

"I'm gonna put Stef in bed, make him some lunch, and I'll be back down to feed all the rest of ya."

"Take your time," Tyler told him, smiling. "You did real good with the rodeo, Stef. I'm real proud."

"I still want to talk to you about your kids, Tyler."

"Both those kids is older than you, Stef."

"What does that have to do with anything? I'm going to invite them out here to the Red."

"And for you, on Rand's invite, they might come," he confessed.

"Good." I gave him a grin.

He shook his head and settled back into his chair.

Inside the house, I told Rand that he needed to talk to Glenn and Zach.

"I know," he said as he bent, put an arm under my legs, and lifted me into his arms.

"I'm not an invalid."

"Just shut up and let me carry you in my own house if I want to."

As he mounted the stairs, I leaned my head into his.

"Better."

"Did you tell Rayland that you weren't giving him the grazing rights?"

"Yes."

"And what did he say?"

"He said that if he were me, he wouldn't give them to me either."

"And?"

"And I dunno, Stef. We'll have to see where we go from here. We ain't never gonna be a father and son since I already had one, but maybe we can get to be somethin' better than we are now."

"You're gonna let Zach stay, right?"

"Yes, I am."

"And what about Glenn?"

"I will help Glenn with the restaurant and whatever else he needs to a point."

"What does that mean?"

"That means I ain't lookin' to let him have you."

I scoffed, leaning to kiss behind the man's ear.

He put me down, there in the hall, and when he was certain I was balanced, he bent and hugged me. I was pressed tight to him and wrapped up so that his face was in my hair and he was breathing me in.

"I love you so much," he whispered fiercely, squeezing tighter.

He really did. "I love you back, Rand."

We stood there, tangled together, each of us content until he lifted me up and carried me the rest of the way to our bedroom. I was put down, and pillows were shoved under my leg, propping me up, making me comfortable. "Here." I patted the space beside me. "Lie down a minute."

He shook his head. "I got lots to do."

But I knew that Mac Chapman had everything under control. Rand's foreman had been pleased to see me like he never was when I got home, clapping me on the shoulder that morning at breakfast, telling me that all cowboys got thrown from horses at least once or twice in their lives.

"Just for a second, Rand, please."

He pulled off his boots and put his hat down on the nightstand and crawled up on the bed beside me. His head went to my heart and an arm curled around me. I stroked the thick black hair as I talked to him.

"Your mother and you, you guys must have talked while you were inside, huh?"

He grunted.

"Is she okay?"

Nod.

"Good, I'm glad. I want her to forgive herself for not telling you."

"I told her I was sorry, and she said she was too."

"I knew you two would be okay. I just didn't know about you and Rayland."

He pressed his big muscular body against me tighter, lifting so his face was tucked into the side of my neck. "Rayland doesn't get me and you. When he does, the day he does, he can be more."

And that made sense.

"I think the idea of you helping Tyler with his kids is real nice."

"We'll both try, Rand, all right?"

"Okay." He yawned. "You looked real nice at the bachelor auction, Stef. Did I tell you?"

"Yes, you did."

"Never again though. You don't go nowhere without me."

"I won't."

He yawned again, nuzzling, and when he sighed the last time, I knew he was falling asleep. Big strong scary man, and he was wrapped around me, clutching tight even when he drifted off. Bella came to check on me minutes later, coming in the room, jumping up on the end of the king-sized bed, and waiting for my word.

"It's fine, this once," I told her.

She lay down, head on her paws, and pushed her muzzle into the arch of my foot. I could feel her warm breath through my sock.

When her head popped up, I looked toward the door. May was there seconds later.

"Oh. there he is."

"He's kinda beat," I told Rand's mother.

She smiled gently. "He's kind of in love, is what he is."

"Me too," I told her as she walked over to the rocking chair in the corner of the room, picked it up, and carried it over beside the bed.

"I can't believe he kept this old thing."

"He loves it—that was your chair, wasn't it? He sits in it usually when he's planning something, when he has to think."

She chuckled. "I used to do the same thing."

We were silent for a few minutes, each thinking, I was sure, about Rand.

"So you talked to Rayland?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And nothing's changed, but Rand knows and that lightens things between us."

"James was an amazing man."

"Yes, he was and I see so much of him in Rand."

"He really loved his father," I said, kissing my cowboy's forehead.

"Well, it went both ways. I mean they never said such things to each other, but they both knew."

"I like being able to say it and hear it."

"Oh, Stef, I love that Rand is the kind of man who isn't afraid to speak his heart. He never did with Jenny and I was worried that he never would, before you."

"He tells me and shows me."

"I know." She nodded and I saw her eyes fill. "And I'm so happy that he can."

She reached for my hand, and I took it.

"If you hadn't gone to the rodeo, Stef, none of this would've happened. It's wonderful that you did that, for all of us, not just Rand."

"Well I don't know if Rayland will ever accept me, and I don't know if he and Rand will ever be friends, but at least the air is clear between them."

"And Rayland sees the life that Rand's made for himself, his ranch, his men, and his life with you."

"Rayland hates me."

"He doesn't. He just doesn't understand how Rand can love you the same as he loved his wife or...."

"You." I squeezed her hand before I let it go.

"Yes."

"He might never understand, and that's okay. He just needs to accept it if he's ever really going to be a part of Rand's life."

"Well, he wants that badly. What man in his right mind would not want to claim Rand Holloway as his own?"

"Nobody."

She smiled at me.

"He's your son, too, ya know? James didn't raise him alone."

Quick nod from her. "I know."

I saw her scrutinizing me. "What?"

"You seem more settled to me, like you took off your parachute."

"What?"

She chuckled. "Stefan Joss, I know that you came into this relationship with Rand ready to bail out if things got rough, pretty sure that they would. You were making sure you had a good enough job so you had an exit strategy ready to go at a moment's notice."

"Oh God," I groaned.

Her laughter got louder. "But since you took that new job at the college, I feel like you've sort of thrown caution to the wind. You're committed to being here now, with him, and to staying. It feels like you're staying."

"I am."

"I'm so glad. I've never seen my son this happy, and because of that, he's not angry with me or Rayland. He's better at accepting faults and forgiving. Not that everything's perfect, but Rand's in a good place in his life, and I love seeing him like this."

"He and Rayland need to fix things between them."

"That's up to them, but we're not talking about that anymore. I'm talking about you, Stefan Joss. You have changed things in Rand's life, given him the home he always wanted, and now you have to realize, yes, everyone makes their own joy, but having you here adds to Rand's. You're the only one who can make him this happy. He's building his life around you."

I nodded because I knew that, and my throat had closed up hearing it out loud. Things you thought in your head always carried more weight when spoken.

"If you weren't here, Stef, the fallout from all this, from Rayland and I keeping secrets, would have been horrible. Rand has a number of good qualities, but before you were here, forgiveness, acceptance, these were not among them. You changed everything."

"I hope for the best."

"Oh, sweetheart." She smiled warmly, rising to kiss my cheek. "Of course for the best."

I watched her stroke her son's hair, put a hand on his cheek. "He's a good man," I told her.

"Yes, he is." She nodded before walking toward the door, taking a moment to give Bella a pat. "And I love how you being here has influenced life at the ranch, Stef. Even something as simple as having a dog here in the house in the middle of the day and not only at night—just those little things are what makes a house into a home."

She was at the door when she turned.

"Keep him up here as long as you can. He needs to rest. I can tell he's tired."

"Charlotte tells me that she's going to help you and Rand have children."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

"I'm tickled pink." She smiled warmly. "Now I'm gonna get lunch started. I'll bring you all up something as soon as I see what there is to fix."

"Yes, ma'am."

She blew me a kiss before she left.

My future was stretched out in front of me, and I could see it clearly, my life with Rand, the ranch, the community he would create, all that he would achieve that was possible, amazingly, because I was there with him. He needed me to ground him, and I was thankful that I could mean that much to a man I loved with all my heart.

"Crap."

I looked down at Rand as he rolled sideways onto his back beside me.

"I fell asleep, didn't I?"

"Just for a few minutes."

"Shit, Stef, I got things to do."

I rolled over on top of him, pinning him under me to the bed. "Just stay a little while longer."

"That ain't fair. You know I can't say no to you."

"I know that, Rand Holloway, and it's one of the many things I love about you."

Mary Calmes currently lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, with her husband and two children and hopes to eventually move off the rock to a place where her children can experience fall and even winter. She graduated from the University of the Pacific (ironic) in Stockton, California, with a bachelor's degree in English literature. Due to the fact that it is English lit and not English grammar, do not ask her to point out a clause for you, as it will so not happen. She loves writing, becoming immersed in the process, and falling into the work. She can even tell you what her characters smell like. She works at a copy store but has been unable to incorporate that into a book... yet. She also buys way too many books on Amazon.